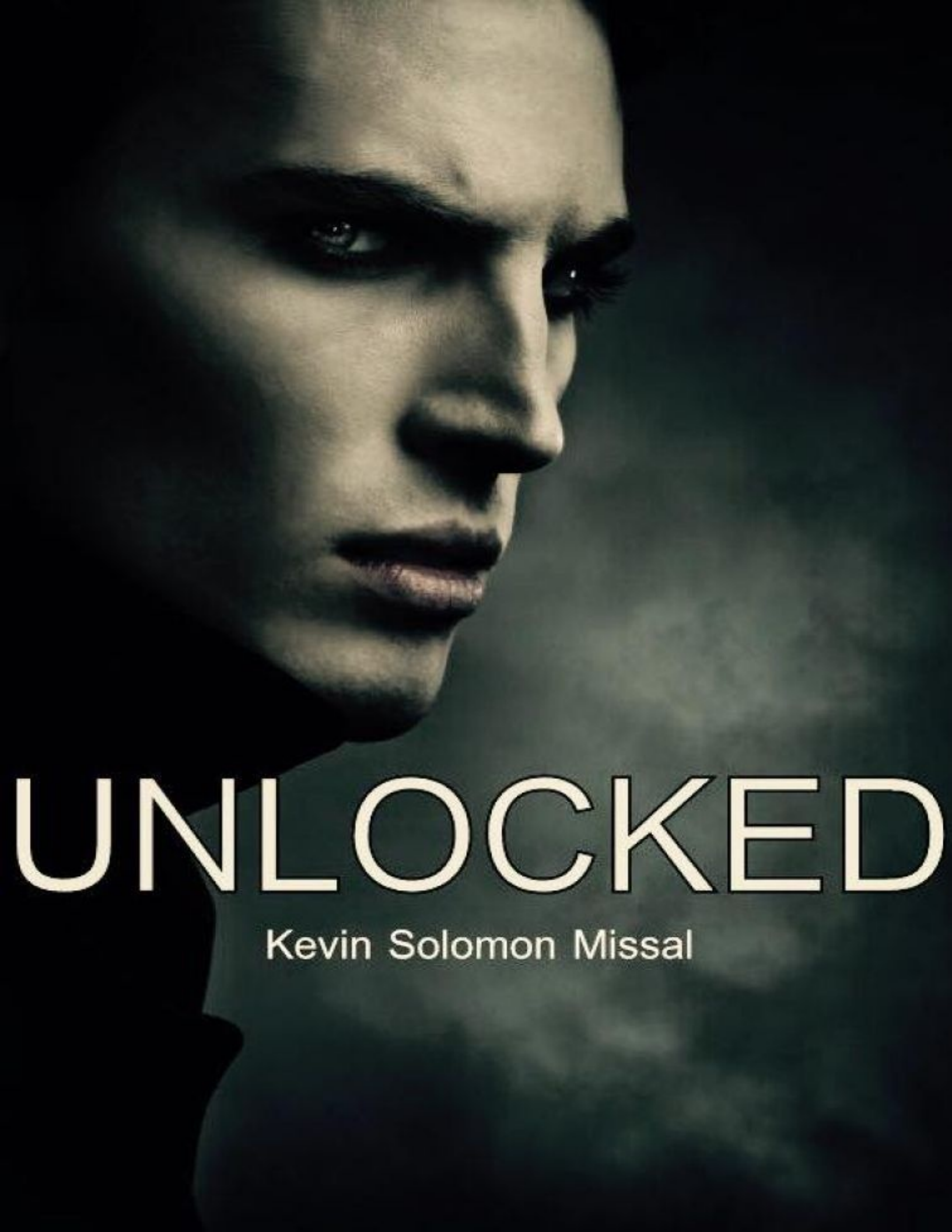
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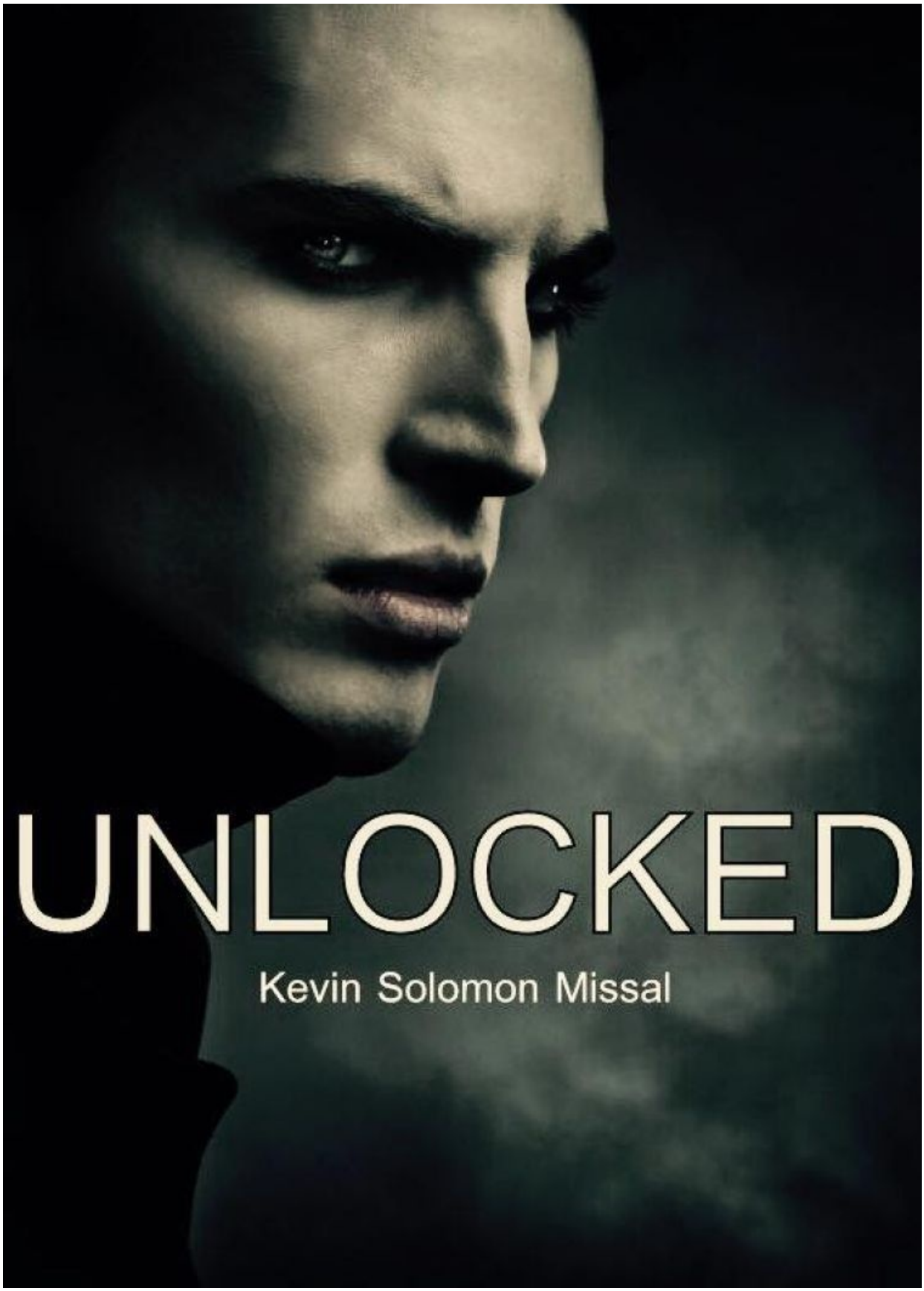
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Acknowledgments

To start with, I want to thank God.

I wouldn’t have completed my novel if it weren’t for my parents, Leslie and Jyotsna Missal, who always believed in me and supported me.

I’d like to thank my brother, Ryan Mario Cardoza, who not only helped me with my novel in giving me views of what to write, but also helped me in deciding the

cover for it.

I want to especially thank Pawan Pandey, who helped me to give a shape to the novel itself and to find the loopholes in it.

A sincere thanks also goes out to my friends, as well.

Wr eck

Caspar Socrates was going to die soon if he didn't do something about it. His face had gone chalk white and his bronze eyes were now pale. He bit his scarred lips and pressed against the lower vertebro-sternal rib where a long gash oozed blood - thick, fleshy, and dark.

Poison...That was what the knife had been dipped into before it pierced his diaphragm, searing bones and flesh.

I am poisoned, he thought.

Shock and fright eluded him. A profound numbness was now present. The numb truth that life was leaving the mortal confines of his body.

He shrugged out of his trench coat and slid his t-shirt over his head, revealing his bare chest. The wound was threaded and bloody. The gash wasn't what caught his attention. He stared at the long, spinning blue lines spiraling across his chest. They curved upward like a ferocious venomous river toward his throat. The poison was infecting each and every cell.

Antidote? He had none. Nor did he have any idea as to what to do.

Except...Except... His eyes narrowed as he lost himself in thought. *Yes! Yes!*

His nose flared slightly as he smiled. With one hand pressed over the wound, he made his way toward the bookshelf, slowly tracing the leather-bound collection with the other hand. He brushed the sweat off of his brow and withered in desperation. There was a scripture here somewhere. He knew it.

Ten minutes. That’s how long he had before the blue vines reached his brain and sucked all the fluids into their ferocious wombs. He would then succumb to a deep, deathly slumber.

The yellowish tint of the papers, collected and tied by a silver string, was tucked inside a double-bound dictionary. With shaking fingers, he withdrew them and found the summoning ritual of the fourth Horseman, Death.

Seven minutes.

Can’t someone borrow me more time? Anguished, Caspar cursed.

He found what he was looking for within the scripture’s pages. Drops of red clambered along his waist. He dipped two fingers within the wound and slowly traced the sigil, craftily and with no hesitation, upon the oil-tainted wall. He pulled himself back to examine his handiwork. A pentagram in between several runes with stars around it now lay before him.

Six Minutes.

He began chanting in Latin. “Cum aperuissetsigillum quartumaudivivocemquarti animalisdicentem: Veni! Etvidiet ecceequus pallidus; Nomensedebat Morset inferussequebatureuma tergo. Data est illis potestassuperquartam partemterraeinterficeregladio fameet peste, et a bestiisterrae.”

Nothing happened. Seconds went by. The poison was spreading. The light blue streaks were getting thicker. It was just a matter of the spell being right.

He looked at the sigil again to see if something went wrong. Everything was perfect. The pentacle was subtly drawn with mortal blood. The runes and the devil’s mark were exactly what they should be. Even the incantation, which he’d said in Latin, was right to the point with spotty pronunciation. Yet what was wrong?

Four Minutes.

Damn!

"This better be important, mortal," a sly, threatening voice echoed from behind him.

He turned around to find a tall, lean man with a Scottish descent staring back at him. His face was angular and tight with round, oval emerald eyes encircled with eyeliner. His hair was a deep brown with a mixture of black, sticking up like lightning bolts. His chest was bare and he wore a large white overcoat that consistently changed its color from ashy to pale to green along with burgundy-colored pants and white slippers on his long feet. Piercings and tattoos of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs marked his body.

Caspar glanced at Death's staff. It was long, broad, and gold-plated. The length and slight sharp turn of the staff made him think. He had seen that kind of shape somewhere, though he couldn't remember. The memory soon surfaced within his mind with crystal clarity. It was in a shape of a was sceptre. The only difference was a white gem was attached to the end of the twisted handle.

Truth be told, he didn't expect Death to have piercings and eyeliner on his face. As far as he knew, Death was the oldest entity to have lived on the face of this universe. Older than time itself. He knew he shouldn't have thought about Death, then and there. He had more important issues on his hand.

"I am going to die!" he cried with agony.

"I can see that, Mortal," Death replied, his voice emotionless. His look was unnerving. "What does that have to do with me?"

"I need to live."

Death cracked a smile. "You are not the first person to say that."

Caspar hesitated. It may have been because of the pain, which didn't let up so he could say what he needed to say. With force and fury, the words burst from his lips: "I...h – have heard . . ." he coughed loudly. "You are the only...ah...person who can help me."

"Of course," Death mused. "After all, I am Death."

"What do you want? What should I present to you as an offering?" Caspar snarled with impatience.

"I am not a stupid animal." Death moved forward, his thin lips twitching with amusement. "Aren't you...? Well...you are Caspar Socrates, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I have heard about you." He sensed that Death was up to something. Death's green eyes were sparkling and he wore a mischievous smile upon his lips. "All right. I'm ready to help."

Caspar narrowed his eyes. One minute. The blue streaks of venom raced across his cheek, spreading down his chin and up to his forehead. He fell to his knees, hands shaking, lips trembling.

"Why t – the s – s – sudden change of t – thought?" "Would you rather hear an explanation than live?" "Okay. Proceed."

Caspar surrendered. He couldn't guess as to what the manipulative motives behind Death's sudden agreement to let him live were, but he didn't care. For now. He only resented the fact. He didn't want to die. Not now, at least.

"Before I help you, I need you to know that you will fulfill a contract with me. I will grant you rebirth and in return, I will need something from you. I will not tell you now, but after you are saved, your questions shall be answered. So, before

anything, do you really want to live? Be sure, for you are going to have a deal with Death."

"Yes, I am sure." Caspar felt his nerves explode, his heart breaking. "I want to

live."

Five seconds. Four. Three. Two.

"Good," Death touched his blue swollen forehead. "Because you are going to make a deal, Mr. Socrates, I should say . . ." he paused. The sparkling within his eyes faded and the hollowness of his malevolence was visible. "For everything, there's a price."

Without another thought, Caspar collapsed.

***

Caspar's eyes shot open. The rending pain had drained from his body. He didn't know why or how, but he felt quite energetic. He pulled himself to his feet and stared at his pale hands, touching his cheeks, neck, lips, nose, and ears with disbelief. It was unimaginably strange to find himself standing there alive and well. His hand slid across the area where the gash had been. He touched his skin, slowly, hoping to find warm, oozy flesh. Instead, he found the gentleness of his cold flesh.

His eyes fell upon a corpse lying next to his booted feet. It was one he was familiar with. Why would he not be? It was his own body that lay there, tortured and convulsed because of the venomous blue ink coursing through his veins.

He couldn't believe that his dead body was lying there in front of his eyes. He was dead. Yet he was also standing there in spirit form. He never used to cry, but right now, with his being dead, he didn't care if a few tears tumbled from his eyes.

"You are such a wimp," Death replied, his voice interrupting his thoughts. He turned to face Death. He was the same as ever with his glossy hair and

luminous green eyes. "You said I wasn't going to die!" he bickered as his bronze skin gleamed.

"Oh, shut up, Mortal!" he replied and pushed the nineteen-year-old boy gently, almost like a fatherly pat. "You are not dead. You are just gone. Well...you're in a coma, so to speak. You are neither dead, nor alive."

Caspar narrowed his eyes. It was called Limbo, a neither dead, nor alive state. Limbo is a way of communicating with people who had died whose eidolons and spirits walked the face of earth, unsatisfied and unreconciled with their death. They wish to stay on Earth.

That means . . .

He moved over to the window and saw souls walking aimlessly down the streets. They were many, almost twenty, glancing at each other, swollen and broken down.

"Those are all . . ."

"Yes, I know. The ones who are neither dead, nor alive," Death quipped. Caspar noted Death's playful expression. "Like me. Boring!" he whispered,

frowning. "So what is this all about?"

"For the love of me, you were poisoned. You were almost going to die. That poison was rare. It was hard for me to find its cure, but I did. I cured you, though the healing process is a bit...slow. You are in Limbo until the process completes." He made his way toward the sofa and made himself comfortable. "And yes, since we have some time, shall we discuss the formalities of our contract? That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Caspar ran a hand through his thick, curly hair. He said ‘yes’ to something he didn’t know anything about. But then, he would have died without Death’s help. He didn’t like owing favors. Nor did he like owing things to anyone. Now was one of those times.

“Going against the contract would fairly be of no use, I assume?”

“You can’t cheat Death.” He smiled and scoffed. “I would snap my fingers and you would turn into dust.”

“I saw. You were somewhat happy by the fact when you . . .”

He narrowed his thin, golden eyes and ‘recognized’ Caspar. Death smiled. “Guilty.” He waved his hand about. “I have heard rumors about your past

endeavors. They really fascinate me.”

“Rumors?” Caspar spat the word in disgust. “What?”

“Rumors are like poison,” Caspar muttered.

Death’s smile turned cool and indifferent. He pulled out a small shadowed teal-colored scroll out of his pocket. He gave it to Caspar. “This is the contract. You have to sign at the end.”

“I am not gonna sign!” Caspar responded. “Until you tell me what is in it.” “You will be my executor and will perform duties on Earth for me.

Essentially, you will find and hunt necessary creatures. You will be the fixer.” Caspar had a hard time in understanding the part where he was going to be a

fixer. However, he did grasp the concept to what an executor was. “I already do that. Hunting. Why you want me to do what I already do?”

“Oh, no, boy,” Death replied. “This would not be an ordinary hunt for you. That would involve what you call ‘mythical beings’ like the Kraken and Anubis. It

would include vicious creatures that live in darkness and come from other realms. No ghosts and mummified zombies, though."

His eyes glinted in the light as he assessed Death. He hummed beneath his breath, bitter thoughts racing through his head as he tried to think of what to say. He could back off and die, but he didn't want that. Not now.

With no other option available to him, he grabbed the quill out of Death's hands to sign the contract. He didn't ask as to why Death was letting him live in order to work for him. Granted, he did want to know the reason. He was curious, after all. Nevertheless, he scrawled his signature across the parchment.

Death examined it and gave him a crispy, cold smirk. "Well, it's done." Caspar remained quiet. It was the best thing to do right now. Death, with a

queasy expression upon his face, hauled himself up with the help of his gemmed rod. "Why haven't you asked for a reason?"

"Because I know you won't give me one," Caspar replied.

"You are wrong about that. Why wouldn't I tell you?" Death winked. "As you are now my right hand man, I am obliged to tell you everything." He glanced at Caspar's muscular chest. "Get dressed. We are going to my palace."

"For what?"

"For the reason, boy! I have a purpose!" His eyes were full of gentle brusqueness. "You must know why I am doing this, because if you don't, everything you will do for me would not matter much to you. Like my intentions, I need someone to share that purpose with me, even though it will be against his will."

Caspar pulled on a blue silk shirt and a coat, buttoning the front. It was a surprise that he could wear clothes while in spirit form. Yet he was in Limbo and that somehow made his apparition have a physical touch. He brushed his hair to tidy it up.

“Behind every action, there’s a purpose. Everyone has,” Death said. “Not me,” Caspar replied.

“We both know that’s not quite true.” His cheeky, sleek smile was devoid of emotion and humor. It was a hollow gesture. “You hunted creatures. There is a reason behind why you do it. Every lunacy has a past, as does yours.” He stepped toward Caspar, sniffing and clenching his jaw as he inhaled his fear.

“Something...something is there. You hide it well. Behind that cold exterior, boy, you have the heart of a child. Something made you become like this. It’s made you do what you do right now. It’s dark, too.” Death’s pupils shimmered, his gaze unflinching beneath Caspar’s hard look.

“Your past...it’s dark. It’s confusing.” Death stepped back and laughed loudly. “But then, doesn’t everyone have a frightening past? Yours is just...well, more frightening, that’s all.”

Caspar’s lips thinned to a tight line. He clasped his hands behind his back and said, “I am ready. You said you wanted to tell me why you are all doing this, so let’s get this out of the way.”

Death smiled, pleased with his determination. “Oh, yes. Yes, follow me.”

***

Death hadn’t brought his bike with him. When he doesn’t run from one place to another in a blink of an eye, he’d always use his white stickered bike. Today, however, he didn’t have it with him. Being a Horseman, the bike was like his horse, one with an engine.

Death informed Caspar that his palace was in Neitherworld. It was a no man's land. It was where the souls rest in peace. It was Death's homeland, his palace, his eternal dynasty.

Throwing himself into a purple-colored vortex, Death made his way toward a portal and waved at Caspar to follow. The portal looked as if it was made of vicious colors, each running and chasing each other. Stepping through it, he found himself within a dark and glittery passage which had only a descent. No ascent was present, whatsoever.

Echoes of the dead were heard as they walked along. There were yells and curses and painful shrieks. Caspar walked behind Death, carefully counting steps. Death, on the other hand, was reciting verses of ancient, Greek poets.

"Sorry about the souls, Death said. "They always are really...you know, er...troubled."

"Oh, it's perfectly all right," Caspar replied, his voice full of thick sarcasm. The stairs ended and Caspar set foot upon the cold floor of the long hallway.

Death walked silently along their dim surroundings, tapping his rod as he moved along. At the end of the hall, Caspar soon realized that he was in another place altogether. He could feel the aura permeating throughout. It was hard and troubling as it flew across his face.

The place resembled a cave, a humongous cave. It had skulls scattered around the corners and the edges with jaws opened and smelling foul. At the end of the cave was a throne made completely of bones. Standing with bows and hands clasped in front of them were several suited men and women. They all looked formal, tidy, and tough and were not uttering a single word between them. Briefly, Caspar wondered who they were.

As if he'd read his mind, Death said, "They are reapers. My workers." "Why do you live in a cave?"

"This is a palace. It alters its appearance according to what you perceive. In other words, you are seeing what you want to see. Right now, you are seeing a cave. For me, this is a white, greenish palace with huge pillars and shiny floors. Everyone has a different eye, don't you think?"

Caspar didn't say anything. His eyes narrowed as he studied everything around him, his hands behind his back. Death waved at him to follow and moved deeper into the cave to transverse another subterranean passage. He trudged behind him, trying not to trip on anything. They reached a small room. Unlike the other, it had a polished floor and was sealed from all sides except the entrance. Two reapers with tight pale skin appeared, silent as a doorknob, staring blankly at the walls around them.

Death entered the room with Caspar in tow. He didn't expect any surprises there. Yet standing in front of a twenty-foot tall hourglass, surprise was a mild word to even whisper. It was rimmed in gold from the top to bottom with bronze-colored sands inside of it. The sand was dripping slowly, though there was something unusual about its aura. Caspar took note of the cracks forming around the hourglass.

"This is the only thing in my domain which looks same to everyone. This little thing of mine cannot be triggered by human perception.

"I was born before time was even created. I can't die, Caspar, because at the end of the day, you can't reap the reaper. Here, look at this." His head swung in the direction of the hourglass. "This is my essence," he said, his voice dull and hollow, yet petrified, as if something nasty was going to happen. "I assume you would have seen the cracks around the hourglass by now. That is me being destroyed, slowly. The

cracks are destroying my essence. You might want to know how, don't you? How are these cracks forming on my essence?"

He patiently waited for Caspar's reply. Yet he gave none. Instead, he stood there, offering Death a stony glance, unable to utter a word.

"The souls – the penniless souls which crumble my essence...You see, souls are the most powerful thing, even more powerful than me. These cracks are happening because these unsatisfied souls, after their death, go into my domain and shake my essence, thus leading to these cracks. Limbo is the place people are who neither dead, nor alive go. They stay on Earth, but the ones who don't come here and pour all of their anger upon my essence. They are unsatisfied, unhappy, and vindictive."

"May I ask why they are so troubled?"

"Theirs is a useless death. You see, deaths are of two kinds, a peaceful death and a chaotic death. Peaceful death includes disease, infection, old age, accidents. It's not the soul's fault. It's just their destinies. Chaotic deaths are those such as murders, becoming food of a vampire, or a prey of demons. When they die of these reasons, they come here and start destroying me."

"What is my role in all of this?"

"Your role is to help those souls. Not the ones in the domain, but the ones up there." He pointed his finger toward the ceiling. "I will give you the contract and will tell you who you have to save. Not every soul, mind you. I will tell you to save those souls that are important. Those souls have the power to weaken my essence."

"Why must you specify?"

"Because souls have various categories. Some are strong. Some are weak. The weak souls I am not interested in, as they cannot harm me. The strong ones, however,

are the ones that can make me vulnerable. Those are important. Those souls need to be saved." Death offered him a crooked smile. "You need to save people as well as their soul."

"Just like
hunting,"
"Only
worse,"

Caspar sighed deeply. "I like
worse." Death tapped his staff
with enthusiasm.

"What happens if the hourglass breaks?" Caspar asked. "You can't die so it doesn't make sense. Death can't be dead."

"I'll go into a deep sleep. Forever."

"I feel as if I'm being used for your own purposes."

"I stated as such, not too long ago. You are saving Earth, at least. Does that not make you feel better?"

Caspar arched his brows in confusion. "By saving you, how am I saving Earth?"

"I am Death. I reap. If the one who reaps goes into a deep sleep,
then . . ." "People will not die as there would not be anyone to take
their souls. The

order will break and chaos will fall. Am I right?"
he muttered. "Exactly! I handle the order and the
order handles me." "You have these reapers of
yours, but...?"

"They are...Well, they are connected to me. If I go, they'll go as well." He rubbed his palms together while cradling his staff upon his shoulder. "Now, if all your queries are answered, I hope you want to go back to your body. Every floating spirit is a desperate maniac in this place."

"You can count me as an exception, then," Caspar replied.

In Ashes

The dark woods were nothing compared to Hell, yet it gave the dreadful sigh of it. The treacherous gentleness of the water, which swung along a winding path and crushed against the rocks, radiated a tint of silver in the bright moonlight.

The noise of the crackling wheels came to a crashing halt, suddenly splashing the wet mud. The door opened. From the driver's seat descended a thin, slender man with a nose slightly bent inwards, like a skull outside of the skin. The darkness hid the person's face and most of his appearance. With flashy boots and a long loose overcoat, the man walked across the edge of the forest, stamping mud out of his boots as he reached the foot of a large gothic mansion that was covered with bushes and leaves.

The doors were shiny and reflective. The mansion had a mysterious sense of grandeur about itself, which appeared further alluring because of the two statues that stood facing each other as they guarded the entrance.

The man's hair was cropped at the back, slightly beaky and edgy like thorns, and gleamed like silver. He stopped in front of the door as the guardsman's hand touched his chest. He did not react, aside from the smirk that crossed his thin lips. Beneath the guise of darkness, the man's bloody gums interspersed with numerous maggot-like insects were visible and curled repulsively between his conical fangs. They were enough to cause the guard to step back and look at him in disbelief.

"Who are you?" the guard asked as he gulped with nervousness. "I am an uninvited guest."

Another guard bravely stepped forward and said, “This is private ground. Y– Y – You a – a – are not a – a – allowed h – h . . .” He was unable to complete the sentence without stammering.

“The event taking place in there isn’t really private, is it?” A chuckling gurgle came from him. “It’s more a sort of...public thing, isn’t it?”

“W – W – What are y – you?” the guard asked.

“Mostly,” the cold-blooded laughter came loudly, “I am...How shall you say? Nothing, but your nightmare!”

He snapped his fingers. The guards exploded into ashes and splatters of blood. He shouldered the door open and walked inside. His eyes, sunken deep inside their sockets, were burning with fire within them as he turned to face the crowd assembled in the common hall. He kept silent, hands inside his coat’s pockets, his body crooked and his head bent toward his shoulders.

The men and women all stood in mournful positions, their face scarred and dangerous. They possessed bleak eyes and cold skin. Fire crackled and emitted orange light, shining across the hideous frescos of fabulous beings upon the walls. There were no seats, only an empty room with logs kept on one side.

Standing at the front of the room was a demon, easily recognizable with its overwhelming appearance of hideous tattoos and runes woven and intricately threaded across its face. The pupils were a profound blue and rendered an unusual effect to its surroundings.

Hidden within a dim corner, the man didn’t speak a word. Sometimes, he coughed. He was wary, lest he should attract the attention of the mob. The mob was too busy in their deliberations, however, to take much notice of him.

“We gather here to discuss an unfortunate tragedy which has struck our Order,” the demon said, anger flashing within its cold stare.

The man could see that the men and women looked as if they were humans. They were, in fact, actual vampires, werewolves, demons, or warlocks. Their human appearance was but a necessary façade to keep those outside of their world at bay.

“This great Order, which has all the distinguished members from hell – Abaddon, Azazel, Leviathan, the other Princes of Hell, and every demon of any kind with vampires, warlocks, werewolves, and our brethrens in cause, is in great danger. The vampire, Vorlok, the High Priest of our Order in Moscow was found dead by one of the hunters from Newcastle.”

The vampires flashed their fangs in anger and frustration.

“We made this legion, this order, to have a balanced sustainability on planet Earth after our realms were closed for us and long forgotten. Through this order we tried to remain together in a pact to fight those treacherous, heartless beings above us

– those humans. Now, the main agenda behind our dream is shattered by the machinations of mortal beings.

“We are losing. Our people are being hunted. We have no ways to go up against humans who are larger in numbers and hunters stake us until we breathe the final testaments of our life. Look into each other’s face again, for you will never know when you will be seeing those faces again.”

Everyone shared glances with each other. Fear of extinction crossed their pale faces, cold vices turning the tormenting brutality of each and every one of them into innocence of gender. Their eyes were tired and they looked scared. They could feel the pervasiveness of tension, of fright, which they couldn’t hide. They looked at their daughters, at their beloved tenderness. They noted the innocence of their sons, the

new breed of werewolf, the new flesh of vampire, the newborn warlock offspring, and committed everything to memory.

They feared that they would be slaughtered, their heads sliced off and fingers chopped. The hunters wouldn't leave a touch of magic on this land, not even their offspring's, who were mere children and could be tamed. They would kill them as well with no guilt and no mercy.

"Now, now. Losing hope without giving a try is a frail stupidity," the man spoke up, moments later, a smile dancing across his clean-shaven face.

"Are you a new member?" the demon asked in a grievous tone. "More like a guest," he replied in a cold, peculiar tone.

"We have given our complete last effort against those vermin. We didn't succeed."

"Success comes with blood." He stepped out of the shadows and walked toward the demon. Men and women stepped aside to give him room.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Manfred Croft," he said. "And the rest of my history is not more important than the matters at hand. What matters now is how to reestablish that lost hope within you crazy people again." He turned towards the members as he spoke.

"And how would you regain our hope?" the tattooed demon with a chiseled his jaw inquired.

"Hope is never regained. Hope is always won." He paused. "In a battle," he laughed loudly like an insane man. "I can do that. I can win hope for you, for the order."

Amazed gasps came from the crowd. They all looked stunned. The magicians nodded as the vampires narrowed their eyes. Werewolves sniffed the air, crinkling their noses. The other creatures seemed a tad confused.

"And how would you do that?"

"No, no, no! Bad question, you idiot!" he laughed, clapping his hands together momentarily.

"I, the Abaddon, the demon of destruction, cannot stand your insanity here. Furies, take him to the dungeons! I shall kill him myself."

"That's a bad idea, you see. Killing the one who is going to help you raise Lucifer Morningstar," Manfred replied.

A silence of dread descended upon the entire room before it was broken with gasps of disbelief. Everyone, both the knowing and the confused, could feel the aura of something hard, something damned. They couldn't bear the idea that Manfred Croft, an outsider, an outcast, would raise the Devil from Hell's Purgatory, the inner cage where Lucifer was bound. Could he really break their Father, their Creator, free?

"You liar!" someone hissed. "You come here with courage and assume that we would believe that disgusting lie of yours?"

"You can risk killing me and live with the guilt that you had a chance with someone like me who could have raised the one who created all of you," he said smoothly and exhibited his white, pointed nails at everyone. "Or you can assist me."

"How do we know that you are not lying?" another prodded.

Manfred laughed. "You idiot! Look around yourself. There are creatures of every kind here. I...I am just a normal trickster. I could be killed by anyone of this Order right now, instantly. So why would I lie in a place where I am in peril? I wouldn't. I am telling you the truth. What to say? Well, I am an honest man."

“Yes, I believe you,” Abaddon whispered coyly. “Not about raising Lucifer, but about getting killed by anyone here, especially myself.” He moved forward to catch him as a woman shouted in the distance.

“We can take his help!” she cried. “Yes, we can,” another said.

Abaddon assessed the crowd. “We don’t have a choice here, do we? I know the last thing we should do is trust a stranger, but isn’t every person among ourselves is a stranger?”

“Yes, yes, if he doesn’t help us, I will kill him,” a warlock assured. “I will snap his neck. But we should try him out, at least.”

Abaddon gritted his teeth. He couldn’t believe that the mob was on the stranger’s side. Yet he knew he had no choice in the matter. The warlock had said it right. He just had to be where the flock dwelled.

“All right!” Manfred chuckled as Abaddon raised his finger. “But answer me this, trickster. Why are you doing this? What is it that you will get out of the rise of Lucifer?”

“Chaos.” Manfred licked his bleeding lips. “Some people have no reason, no purpose behind their actions. Some people...Well, they just want to see the world collapse.”

A vampire yelled from within the crowd, her voice smooth and silky. “How would you raise our father?” A deceiving smile spread across her mourning face. Nevertheless, she felt hope reaching out for her.

“Don’t try to question curiosity. Because then it will lose its meaning,” Manfred replied.

The vampire’s smile didn’t fade. It only grew. “Surely every method of raising our Father has been tried? He was forever caged in Purgatory with no way out,”

Manfred smirked at that. He ran unsteady fingers through his silver hair. “Every lazy person finds easy ways to do things,” he said in a sleek voice, his cold laughter spreading across the hall.

Da ncing Dream

Caspar looked around, trying to recall how he'd ended up in a diner. It was bustling with men and women who cuffed their sons and daughters, buying food, snacks, and drinks for them. They looked busy in their own, small worlds, chatting.

Everyone was engrossed within what they were doing. A pregnant waitress dropped the used dirty trays and plates in a basket while taking orders. The chef was roasting a pink flowered steak in his frying pan. Men with bald heads and lazy eyes sat with beer cans in their hands and discussed the oncoming football game. Families were clustered together talking to each other in whispered conversations so no one else could hear their gossip.

Caspar didn't know this place. He didn't know where he was. He'd just arrived there, but how? Something was blocking his memory and not allowing him to see the past.

He headed for the door and yanked it open. Endless swaths of the desert met his eyes and flabbergasted him. A simple, dusty road was the only feature that stood out in the monotony of desert along with a petrol pump. Several cars were parked nearby. He hurried back inside as the aridity and heat of the desert was oppressive.

He approached the waitress and asked, "Excuse me, where am I?"

"At the Happy Diner," she said, flashing her wide, welcoming teeth as she

smiled.

"No. I mean, where am I? What desert? How did I come to be here?" His eyes were bulging, his grave voice threatening.

"You are weird, Mister."

He grabbed the woman's shoulder and looked directly into her eyes with a searing stare. He had never touched a woman with force and he never intended to. Yet something was odd. He'd appeared in a diner in middle of desert with no clue as to why. He desperately needed to know where he was.

"What desert is this?" he asked again.

She hesitated. Her eyes were full of fear, tears shining within the depths of her beautiful, brown eyes. He briefly took note of the brown curls that gently framed her face. He had never liked girls. They were selfish, intolerant creatures, but somehow this woman – this girl, exuded a different feel altogether.

"You are pregnant!" he murmured and let go of her shoulders and stood uprightly in an apologetic manner. "I am...um . . ." It was hard for him to say sorry, as he never really said it to anyone, not even to his parents.

"Sorry?"

"Yes, that word."

Caspar swallowed past the lump in his throat. His face was devoid of any emotions, but his unnerving narrowed golden eyes showed the awkwardness to his previous action.

"You could have asked kindly."

He gritted his teeth and managed to smile, pursing his lips and hiding his angry teeth. He didn't know what to say and blurted out, "Kindly, can you please tell me which desert is this?"

"It's just...after Tom left me . . ." she breathed as if she hadn't heard a word he'd said. She began her story. "I felt hopeless. How can he do that? I mean, first he proposes, tells me how much he loves me and next thing you know, he leaves me after hearing about my pregnancy."

Caspar rolled his eyes. He couldn't become sympathetic to her plight. "For God's sake, lady. I'm the last person you want to have this talk with."

"Wha...?" she sputtered.

"Oh, yes, open your stupid mouth and say your stupid words. I don't care if Tom or Klaus has left you. I just don't care. You were foolish enough to fall in love with him in the first place. Your mistake. It's entirely your mistake. But now I think I know why he left you. I know exactly why he left you."

"Why?" Her face had gone extremely white. "Three words – you irritate people."

The woman didn't say a word. Caspar stared down at her wide angry eyes, his expression stern. She walked away, refusing to glance in his direction. "You are like the person in a medical show who is crippled," she said.

"His name is Dr. Gregory House. If you want to mock me, at least do your research," he mocked.

With a sigh of relief, Caspar looked around. He was frustrated as well as panicked, but he knew how to keep his emotions at bay. He looked about, taking in his surroundings. Standing quietly, at the end of the diner's hall, was a creature – well suited with musty boots, its features overgrown on his whippy body. From the shoulders down, he looked ordinary, but his face was that of a goat. It had a long jaw, thin stretched lips, and red eyes streaming with blood that curiously impassive. Long horns were tilted slightly and set far apart from its long, scrubby ears. Upon its forehead was a tiny glowing pentagram.

Shock coursed through Caspar's body and he began to feel unbalanced. His eyes were wide with amazement and awe, surprise spreading across his pale face. He

didn’t know how to react. The suited goat-headed man was standing still, unmoving and unblinking. He gazed at Caspar with curious interest.

“Everyone...run!” Caspar yelled.

No one listened. They stared at him as if he was insane.

He pointed to the end of the diner. “Can’t you primitive apes see that demon with a goat head standing there? Can’t you see him?” he shrieked.

Heads swiveled in the direction he was pointing in, but no one saw a thing. “Are you fine, dear?” a sympathetic old lady with a pink handkerchief

inquired.

Caspar didn’t reply. He grabbed his head. It hurt as a searing pain through it as if someone was trying to pierce it with hot metal. He looked about. Everyone seemed concerned. Some of them just shooed him off, murmuring that he was a maniac and others resumed what they were doing. He looked up toward the ceiling. Was it really his subconscious playing with his sight or was it real?

The goat-headed demon just stood there, watching him wearily. Caspar wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw a hint of a smile upon the demon’s face.

Who are you? Caspar mouthed.

The demon shook his head. *Welcome to my world,* the demon shot back telepathically.

Od d

Aaron was searching for food. It was raining in Yorkshire, drops of water seeping into the black oily gutters. The clouds were covering the shimmering image of the whispering moon as people tried to glance at its beauty. The veil of clouds prevented them from doing so unfortunately.

The pub Aaron was headed was in a rather dull place with beggars sitting close to the pedestals, counting the money the wealthy car owners had given them. The road was narrow, almost like a dusty village path. The lamps flickered on their posts ominously, but hardly received any attention.

Aaron walked along with his hood on, hands within his pockets. He entered the pub, closing the door behind him. Pulling his hood back, he looked around. The place was small with a wood carved bar and some bar stools in front of it. The light was emitted softly from the bulbs above. He could smell the distinct odor of beer all around him.

Quietly, he approached the bar and sat down. There were three other people sitting close to it. One looked like a corporate executive with a fling tie. The other was certainly a junky with braided hair and droopy eyes. The third one had on a trench coat long enough to hide his entire body. There was no doubt, whatsoever, that the man was heavily drunk.

He ordered beers for in hopes of getting a little relaxation. His body was stiff and tired, due to having overworked.

One bottle of
beer. Two
bottles of
beer.

Three bottles of
beer. Four.

Five.

Six.

And so it ended.

His eyes were blurry. He felt as if his body was a tad disjointed even though he was gripping the table tightly. He shook his head to clear it and ran a hand through his straight black hair.

"Pretty bad stuff, eh?" the man in the trench coat
prodded. "W – What do you mean?"

"I mean . . ." he began. "The beer can shake a person,
right?" "Absolutely," Aaron coughed and smiled.

The man gave a whimsy chuckle. "What's the
problem?" "What do you mean?" Aaron asked with
a drunken smile.

"You came here. You drink loads. There must be some reason behind that, some problem. What is yours?"

"Work."

"Ah, a usual problem," the man laughed.

"No, no, it's not work," Aaron corrected himself. "It's . . ." he smiled. "It's just I think I was being followed."

"Not your fault. Everybody thinks
that," "But mine was d – d –
different,"

"Okay, all right. How was your follower
in...well...appearance?" Aaron hesitated. "It – It...just
looked...familiar."

“Familiar? Well, that’s an improvement. What kind of familiar? Who is the person it resembles?”

“You,” Aaron gasped.

The man narrowed his smoky eyes: “Me? Are you sure?”

“Yes...um...I have to go.” He felt as if his inebriated state had drained.

Aaron got up and immediately scurried out of the pub. The lamps flickered. The beggars had vanished. The alleyway looked lonesome. He walked briskly, looking back once in a while to see if the man in the trench coat was following him. In the dark lane, he was alone, except for the croaking ravens that flew by.

He could hear the footsteps behind him as they stamped and splashed against the muddy waters. He looked back. No one was there. He moved forward, clutching his chest and pulling his hood over his head. The footsteps were rapid now. He started running, afraid to look back.

Aaron stopped, catching his breath. The road was close. Only few yards away!

Come on. Come on.

As he was about to resume his sprint, he halted. In front of him, in a hollow blindness, a shadow wavered. His blood turned cold as his eyes followed the contours of that shadow. He couldn’t believe it. He just couldn’t believe his eyes. It was the shadow of a beast.

He stared back at it. The beast stood there, smiling at him. Shivering and quaking with fear, Aaron took refuge near the bricked wall. He didn’t have any other place to scurry into or hide. He knew, without a doubt, that his annihilation was just few inches away from him.

***

Caspar opened his eyes and pulled himself to his feet as he looked around. He was back. He was happy. His smile reflected how pleased he was with himself. He hurried to the record player and played Beethoven Symphony 3. Humming to himself, he walked to the bathroom and got undressed.

The warm water of the shower splashed against his bare body, slowly seeping all his angst and fatigue away. Gradually, the weakness, which had overpowered him, began to dissipate and soon there was no trace of it. He exited the shower, rubbing his curly hair with the towel and then slowly soaking the remaining water from his skin.

He stood in front of the mirror and saw the pale reflection of his face.

Caspar saw a different man. It was not a boy of nineteen he was seeing, but a man with a jutted jaw, bronze eyes, black hair, high cheek bones, perfect curved lips, and beaky nose. He felt threatened by his cold demeanor and his eyes reflected his fear. Striding into the adjoining room, he sat down on the leather sofa, crossing one leg on top of the other. Caspar shivered slightly as a cold draft filtered throughout the room.

It was a usual tendency, more of a method, really, which Caspar often used. Being naked, a human mind’s potential of thinking exceeds favorably. Or so Caspar surmised. Whether it was true or not, he didn’t care. All he knew was that it helped him.

Sitting there, he looked outside. The sky’s vastness was covered with torrents of clouds, which flocked against the thunder. Birds flew past the polluted smoke that the factory chimney puffed.

His mind simmered with thoughts about the contract and the deal he had made. His stomach churned at the thought that he was now a slave to the Fourth

Horseman of the Apocalypse. He didn’t like it, but he couldn’t do anything about it now. He was bound to an oath, be it dead or alive.

***

“Oh, aren’t you...? You are Caspar Socrates, aren’t you?” Death inquired as he appeared.

He was delighted by the fact that Caspar had summoned him. He was well aware of who he was and of what he did. It was the reason he made an exception in allowing him to live in return for carrying out his orders.

Caspar couldn’t blame Death for hiring him. He was quite infamous for hunting creatures with his mind and agility. He lived for the moment and enjoyed the thrill of the hunt immensely.

“I have heard about your past endeavors. They really fascinate me.”

His adventures thrilled Death. In his mind, he was the only person who could save him. Caspar had to admit he was happy that Death depended on him.

“God! Wear something, will you?”

He gazed at Death as he leaned against the table opposite the sofa. He appeared out of nowhere within the blink of an eye. He stood within his wrinkled overcoat, sans his staff.

“And why should I do
that?” “Aren’t you
embarrassed?”

“A person is embarrassed when he cares about other’s opinion. I, on the other, don’t give a damn about it,” Caspar stated.

Death rolled his eyes. “I forgot how ignorant you are.”

Caspar narrowed his eyes and pursed his. His nose flared as he said, “What is it, Death? You really aren’t here to tell me how ignorant I am.”

“A girl will soon come to you, a maiden. She has a case you have to solve. The odd job you were expecting from me is here.”

“How is it going to affect you?”

“The soul at stake is a destructive one.”

“Ah, I see.” He pressed a finger against his lips in thought. “All right. At what time will she arrive?”

There was an unexpected knock upon the door.

Caspar’s attention was drawn to the door. “Come in,” he said.

The door opened. He snuck a glance to the spot Death had been standing in moments ago. No one was there. Death had had simply disappeared.

Lazarus, his butler, stood before him. He was almost seven feet tall. Because of this, it was difficult for him to enter through most of the doors while standing erect. He would always bend slightly and entered, like he did now.

Loyal and old, Lazarus loved him as if he were his son. Caspar considered him as a father whose shoulder he could cry on and share his feelings with, which he never intended to show in public. Out of all servants and maids, Lazarus was the only one who was allowed within his study. Though he was not aware of the dirty magic work Caspar used to do under his nose.

Clasping his hand in front of him, he said, “Master Caspar, someone has come to see you.” It didn’t surprise him that Caspar was wearing nothing. He had seen Socrates naked like this on various occasions.

“Bring her in,” he instructed.

“Would you mind if I say you should wear something, sir?”

“I do mind.”

“It’s a girl. She would feel awkward.”

“I see.” Caspar nodded. “Do one thing, then, Lazarus. Warn her about this.” Lazarus didn’t argue. He closed the door behind like the humble butler he was.

Caspar waited for his guest to arrive, uncaring of his nakedness. The door opened again and a nervous girl of sixteen stood before him. She wore a school uniform and a small pendant was wrapped around her neck, glistening as it lay upon her chest. She tugged her bag across her shoulder and sifted her fingers through her brown hair. She saw him in a way she had never imagined an investigator to be.

“Oh, God!” she shrieked. “Um . . .”

“I assume you weren’t warned by my butler on the way here? No matter.” “Um . . .” She swallowed nervously, looking sideways. Small spots color

spread across her cheeks.

“So...tell me about your case.”

She found it difficult to do because of his state of undress. Looking elsewhere, she began, “I have heard you have indulged in sorcery which has granted you the knowledge and power of beings unknown to all, save a few. I am here to talk about one of those entities.”

“Oh, please, cut to the chase. You are a witch. I noticed that when you came inside. The topaz pendant you wear has a powerful aura around it. Only witches who are afraid of getting hurt wear topaz around their necks so they cannot be trapped or broken down and, in general, cannot be hurt.” He paused, savoring the moment. “So, to bring things to the conclusion, you are here because your life is in danger, from someone or something.”

Her face paled and her lips thinned to a tight line. She intertwined her fingers together and nodded meekly. “You have guessed things correctly.”

He clapped his hands with delight. “I love being right!”

“But the second part is wrong. My life is not in danger, but some humans are.” “Ah, this is a new turn of events.” An arrogant smile swept across his face.

“Proceed.”

“I was from a family of magic. I had enrolled in a coven, to practice and master the means of witchcraft. It went well, initially. The other witches, my colleagues, they were very sweet, harmless. Until a person, a client, came to our coven seeking help. He said he wanted to bring back Spring Heeled Jack through the means of the occult. Our coven was in need of money he promised to give us, at the time. We agreed. Spring Heeled Jack was raised and bound yesterday. We gave him to the man who then gave us the money,” she said, clearly embarrassed.

“What led you here if everything went well?”

“Do you have the newspaper?” she asked. “It says a boy named Aaron has been clawed to death.” Her lips quivered as a profound tension overcame her. The pain was intense. “Something was wrong. I know it. That man wasn’t some help seeker. He was much more than that. I don’t want more killings!”

She broke down, tears streaming down her ruddy cheeks. “I don’t. That’s why I want you to stop my coven. They have the source pertaining to Spring Heeled Jack. If you destroy the source, Spring Heeled Jack will also be destroyed and the deaths will stop.”

“I didn’t catch your name,” Caspar said abruptly. “Fran.”

“Fran...It is weird that you, being a witch, are betraying your own coven.”

“I don’t care if I am betraying my coven. I just don’t want any more killings.” Caspar regarded her through veiled eyes. “All right, Fran,” he conceded.

“Meet me tonight, at this very place. If you really want to stop them, you have to come with me. But for now, ciao,”

Weakly and without looking at him, she nodded. She left the room, but then came back in once more. This time, she gazed straight into Caspar’s sharp, bronze eyes, which were as smooth as a pair of polished stones.

“Thank you, Mr. Socrates,” she said.

Caspar remained quiet. Fran left without another word.

Th en They Were Three

"Clothes! Clothes! Clothes!"

Caspar pounded the wardrobe and scattered every coat and every shirt he owned. He was trying to find something suitable to wear. His eyes fell upon an item tucked into the corner.

The purple shirt!

He tugged it free and tugged it on, slipping the buttons into place. He then found a pair of denim pants.

"Fascinating," he murmured.

He had no idea he'd had a pair hidden within his wardrobe. He put them on. He next looked through his selection of coats for something suitable to wear.

> Coat. Frock coat. Swaddle coat. Tail-coat. Waist-coat. None of them suited

him.

Within the entire mess, he found a trench coat – woolen, stitched, and fitted. It was simple and clean with neither dust, nor fibers sticking to it. He slid his arms into its sleeves, pleased with his finding.

Excellent, he thought. It was perfect for him. He found a pair of stained boots to complete the ensemble and was soon ready.

He reached for the satchel sitting upon the study table. As he moved, he caught sight of something lustrous on the edge of his periphery. He turned and found a long cane. The handle was made in the shape of an S, which probably signified Socrates. He walked up to it and held it tightly between his hands. It was made of a gilded metal around its corners with a golden knob on top of it. A small card lay across the handle. He picked it up and began reading.

Dear Caspar Socrates,

This is a gift from me. I got it made in Assyria. It will help you when you're in need. And no, I didn't order it from Amazon or anywhere else.

From,

Loving Death ;)

Caspar clutched the card. He smiled.

***

"This is our base," Fran whispered.

The house was located close to a forest and was covered with twigs and thick wines. Large umbrella-shaped canopies overshadowed the moonlight. The hazy skies thundered above, giving an aura of mystery to its surroundings. A pungent, rotten smell of brimstone was carried along in the air and nauseated Caspar and Fran. Cawing ravens fluttered across the landscape, landing on the small twines, every now and then.

The leaves rustled around them. It was difficult for Caspar to see the house. He could only see that it was bricked and broken with plaster peeling in a couple spots. Smoke puffed abruptly from the chimney.

"The smoke is the amalgam of hexes and charms boiled in a cauldron." "You are right," she murmured with pure surprise. "How did you find out?"

He grinned. “People tend to forget what they’ve previously have learnt. I, on the other hand, never do.”

“So, you must know one thing. There are two golems guarding the entrance. Infiltrating via the front door is a stupidity. You have to come from the back. I’ll go inside and try to deactivate the spells near the back door.”

Caspar nodded. “Through the window,” he paused. “Give me a signal so I know it’s safe to go inside.”

She remained quiet as he headed for the backdoor and hid behind a large boulder. She hurried toward the entrance and knocked upon the door three times. She paused and knocked three times once more.

The door opened. Two men were standing several inches from where she stood. They looked as if they were made out of clay. Their eyes appeared to have been punctured by something conical and they had a rocky smile on their faces. They were tall, almost eight feet in length, and were big, bulky, and broad. They were also uneven and misshapen. The golem’s bodies were shining, the light wavering about in multiple bulbous patterns.

“Welcome, Mistress,” they greeted.

Fran was having a hard time in acting normal. She knew she had to act as if her being there was an everyday thing, but it was difficult. If anything were to go wrong, she would be nothing more than ashes once things were said and done.

Walking slowly, she entered the common room. Two witches walked past, giving her a small bow. She bowed in return. She looked around to make sure that no one else was there and cautiously made her way toward the room at the end of the hall.

She passed several rooms as the corridor became long and narrow. Her chest filled with anxiety and tension, something she could never cope well with. Within every room, tucked into the corners, she found witches talking, sitting down, or practicing magic. The coven's mistress, Delirium, was not visible.

Where was she? The door seemed close now. Only few steps...It was only few yards away from her. *Come on. Come on!*

She dove into the room with haste and closed the door behind her, breathing hard. No one had watched her. She was safe for now. Looking around, she found two sparks suspended in the air. They were spells. She approached the floating sparks. They illuminated the entire room.

"Ego vos ad deactivate," she whispered and snapped her fingers.

The sparks fizzled and fell to the floor, as they were nothing than more than balls before turning into bitter powder.

Ok. Ok. I can do this.

Turning to face the window, she gasped with surprise as she found someone she never expected standing there. "Clary!" The words slid past her lips, slowly. "What are you doing here?"

Clary was both surprised and shocked. The expression on her face was unstable. She came forward, her blonde ponytail shook and her sparkling blue eyes glistened within the dark, gloomy room. She was fair, beautiful, and extremely helpful, sometimes, but now her look was one of disbelief and uncertainty.

"Why did you switch off the spells?" she asked and pointed at the powder. "Why did you do that?"

Fran had never expected this to happen. How long had Clary been in the room? Sweat dripped from her forehead and her chest felt heavy. She couldn't take it any more. She couldn't!

"We are killing people!" Fran exclaimed. "We are killing them." "What are you talking about?"

"You remember the client?" "Yes. Mr. Schuster."

"He did something that killed an innocent human." "That's not true."

"I read the paper, Clary. I saw what was written on it. The doctors said that some thing razor-like had clawed his chest, causing his death."

"That could be just a coincidence."

"No. No, it wasn't. That human was killed just two hours after Spring Heeled Jack was freed. You have heard about Spring Heeled Jack, right? He has claws instead of hands. Who could have killed him, then? Was it a coincidence?"

Clary shook her head as if trying to convince herself that what her fellow witch was talking about was not true. Slowly, the deceptive appearance, the musty face, and the mysterious identity of the client seemed more than what he'd shown them. It was making sense, somehow.

"Fran, humans killed many witches in earlier times. They used to burn us just because we were different."

"The older witches did some horrible things, too. They misused their magic. Sometimes, they used it just for fun. Every action has its consequences. It was their fault."

Clary was stunned. She opened her mouth to argue, but there was nothing she could say. Fran could sense Clary coming over to her own side.

"What is your plan?"

"I am letting an investigator in through this door so he could help us in breaking the source that connects to Spring Heeled Jack."

Clary nodded. Fran had a valid point. She sauntered close to her and comforted her. "All right. I'll help you." Her hands softly caressed Fran's hair. "Don't worry."

"I must signal him to come inside."

"This can go horribly wrong, Fran, dear." Clary licked her lips; terrified by the plan she was going to set into motion. "Before we do anything, I want to say one thing. I love you."

Fran was confused. What did she mean?

Clary leaned toward Fran's lips, but she immediately backed off. "What are you doing, Clarissa?"

"I love you. I loved you from the very beginning, since I first saw you. You remember the day, don't you? When we met here, our hands touched gently and we looked into each other's eyes."

Fran's pulse increased. Impulsively, she said, "We never met here. We met at our house, when you came to take me to this . . ."

"I apologize, then," she said.

Yet it wasn't Clary's voice that came through. It belonged to someone else. Fran's heart skipped a beat. The body fell down with a broken head, few steps away.

***

Caspar got the signal. Someone waved at him through the window. He sprinted out of the clearing and reached the door. It was partially opened. He slipped inside and turned around to bolt it behind him. His pupils dilated as he shifted and took in the scene spreading out before him.

The corpse was sprawled on the floor. Spots of blood were scattered all over the room. The corpse's head was flung away from the body, its eyes opened and skin pale like cement. He recognized the cadaver. He recognized it well. It was Fran, decapitated in cold blood. He looked up, fingers clutching the cane. A girl with blonde hair stood nearby. A small smile crossed her lips.

"I didn't want to kill her. She was beautiful, but she resisted, so I had to...do what was necessary."

"Who are you?"

The blonde girl's appearance slowly changed. Her body metamorphosed into that of a suited man, tall and slender, with pointy white nails. The face changed into tattooed ruins with an ashy complexion seeping through its skin. Golden hair became raw and short, like thorns, pulled back with a silvery color flowing through it.

"Manfred!" Caspar hissed.

"Caspar," he mocked. "Are we dramatically calling out our names to each other like they do in movies?"

"You were the client, weren't you? The one who wanted Spring Heeled Jack," Manfred smiled with amusement. "Spoilers."

"Why would you want a slaughter demon? For what purpose? To kill? No. For something big. Something really, really big. That's it, isn't it?"

“Do I really look like one of those villains who will explain the entire plot to world domination?” He smirked. “You came here for the source, am I right?”

“Yes,”

“Bad luck. It’s not here. It’s with me now.”
“You can’t go on killing people. You know that.”

“Just four. I am just gonna kill four people. One is dead. Three are left. When it’s done, I’ll personally gift you the demon, if you so fancy that much.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Once again, do I look like an old fashioned villain, eh?” “The girl was right. You used the witches.”

He chuckled. “I used them? Please. They want the same thing I want.” He clapped his hands. “Okay, okay, you are so curious! How cute! Well then, I should give out more spoilers. She was new. She didn’t know I was not a client, but more like a permanent member of this coven. She thought I gave them money in return to summon Spring Heeled Jack, but I didn’t. Her sisters were already working for me.”

The door opened and twenty or so of the witches enter the room as if they’d been summoned. They gazed at Caspar with wild eyes.

“What do you and your witches want?”

Manfred didn’t say a word. He turned to witches instead. “Do me a favor, girls. Don’t kill him. Trap him and starve him. I’ll come again to meet him, but I want him alive when I return.”

“But Mr. Croft, he would be a nice snack for us,” one of the witches said, licking her lips with desperation.

Manfred stonily approached the witch. His frozen glare was fixed upon her. “Darling, if you don’t listen to me . . .” The witch started to shake. “You’ll vaporize...like this.”

He snapped his fingers. The witch’s body started to fade, turning into ashes and smoke. In seconds, the woman had vanished and the powder scattered as if it never existed in the first place.

“If anyone harms Mr. Socrates, I shall have no mercy.”

With utter disgust, the witches growled, their fangs slicing the air. Manfred’s cold eyes swept over each and every one of them. He walked across the room, past Caspar, who remained silent.

“Why don’t you just kill me?” Caspar asked as his lips trembled. “Because then it won’t be as fun.”

His gauzy laugh echoed loudly. “Happy vacation!” he said before he disappeared from Caspar’s view.

Bl eeding Night

It had been one day. Caspar’s pupils were now colorless. His lips had turned white and his tongue was tasteless. A pungent sourness squeezed within him whenever he licked his lips. He ran a hand through his dusty and slightly sticky hair.

The cell had no light. It was a dark and solitary confinement. The air came from cracks along its edges and a ray of light was like magic for him.

Manfred Croft.

It had been days since he’d seen him. Yet he couldn’t believe it.

His curious manner compelled him to think. Why was he there? What was his motive? Was it the endless happiness of mankind he was trying to corrupt?

He knew Manfred. He knew him quite well. What he didn’t understand was why he’d killed a normal human. He’d used a demon to take Aaron’s life, something that could have been done by another human. Manfred had an agenda and he desperately wanted to know what it was. Sitting in a pitiless darkness with the rotten smell of dead rats, the cool breeze the filtered into his cell was the only relief he currently felt.

Madness overwhelmed him. Clawing at the walls, he tried to get out, hoping that perhaps he could taste the sound of water, but the rough bricks and their starchy taste scraped his tongue and made it dry. He couldn’t see his body dehydrating slowly in a cell. He didn’t make the deal with Death to die there out of thirst and starvation.

He could feel every ounce of his bones, paining and choking him, weighing him down. His cheeks clashed against the harsh ground, his eyes slowly closing.

His weapon satchel was taken away, as was the gift from Assyria Death had given him. He was left in the cell with the clothes he'd put on after his last shower, cold and alone. Flashes of his life came to him of his family, of his sister, of his dog. He smiled to himself as he remembered. It was a hint of happiness rarely seen on his face.

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"Pumpkin, come inside. It's hot. And bring Jessie, as well."

"Mum, I want to play with Jessie. He's finally active since his accident." "I don't care. You'll get a stroke. Come inside now, young man."

"Aww!" The small boy was full of sadness as he patted the retriever's head. "Come on, boy. Mum will get angry."

"Woof!" the retriever barked and wagged his tail with excitement.

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The door opened. The light shone upon Caspar. With a flash of irritation, he fell back against the wall and tried to hide from the striking light of despair as if it burnt his flesh. He held his hands in front of his eyes to block it. He tried to stay away from it as much as possible. It was hard for him to face that intense beam of light.

"Take this, mortal," a voice gruffly replied as its owner pushed a bowl of water toward him.

He crawled toward the bowl and carefully dipped his hands into it. His lips quivered with pain. He splashed the water across his lips, his eyes, and his nose and

felt the cool sensation deep within him. The sensation was one of pure joy. He grasped the bowl and gulped the water in hopes of quenching his thirst.

"Give it back," the voice ordered.

The bowl had a bit of water remaining within it, presumably for someone else to drink. He pushed it back toward the shadow. Hands reached for the bowl. Caspar caught the person's hand. It was made of clay. It didn't take long before the golem wrung its hand free of Caspar's hold. It tried to catch his wrist, as it was the most natural reaction. It was unaware of the fact that Caspar wanted it to do just that. The movement had been a sham.

A kick landed on the golem with great force. The creature stumbled back, freeing Caspar's wrist. He stumbled out of the cell and smiled. He was out and free. Finally.

Rats scurried along the small passageway. Water leaked through several cracks in the ceiling. Long armor plates and swords of various lengths hung upon the stone walls. Paintings of animal sacrifices, witches performing a show in a cauldron, golems kneeling down in front of women wearing conical hats, witches dealing with a tall red-colored figure, presumably to be the devil, were scattered about.

The golem came to his senses. The punctured eyes turned their stony gaze toward Caspar as if trying to find out what had happened. With surprising agility, it made its move. The hand came swiped at him, solid and hard, but Caspar deflected the attack, though the pain of it shook him.

He knew about the golems. They were one of the toughest creatures out there with a body of enormous mass, made of clay, and impossible to defeat. Ordinary people would get crushed beneath the big boulders of rocky hands they have, but

Caspar was not one of the ordinary. He knew that punches and kicks wouldn't do any damage and evasion was not an option.

A light bulb went off inside his head. Water!

He dove for the bowl, ignoring the spilled some water where it had fallen. He smiled, as there was still a bit left within the bowl. He rolled over as the golem's hand of golem hit him across the back. He collapsed to the floor. The bowl was mere inches from him. He crawled toward it and grabbed it to promptly flip onto his back. A large foot was headed straight toward his face.

Caspar pulled the water bowl in front of his eyes. The golem's foot started to dissolve upon impact. The water slowly seeped inside, turning clay into mud. The creature lost its balance and crashed heavily to the floor with a great thud. Caspar quickly pulled himself to his feet.

Golem didn't die. Nor did he dissolve entirely. The water was just enough to handicap him, for the time being.

Caspar's stomach gurgled, as if shouting out for food. He clutched his chest, slowly moving his fingers across his abdomen. He was weak. Defeating the golem had weakened him further. He panted softly as he tried to regain his breath. Without any further thought, he ran.

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He soon realized that he was in a basement as he ran past a number of locked cells. He could hear yawns and snarls from the creatures locked behind those doors. He found a flight of stairs as he came to the end of the basement. He also perceived a

sudden change in the temperature. It was now annoyingly cold. He started rubbing his palms together keep warm.

"Psst!" a gurgling voice spoke up abruptly. Caspar grew alarmed and looked around. "Here, mate, here. To your left!"

He turned to find a metal cage with two white eyes peeping out. They blinked. Once. Twice.

"Help me," the creature hissed. "Why should I?"

"I can help you in escaping this place. You are the same human kid, right? I know where your things are kept. The cane and that satchel of yours,"

Caspar raised his brows. He did need his inventory. His satchel contained several important items and the cane would come in handy. Besides, he could use a hand. After all, he was a tad weak because of his starvation.

He wanted revenge, too. Revenge because they'd trapped him in a cell with only water as his source of nutrition. He burned with the urge to kill each and every witch living under that roof. The thirst for retaliation overcame his emotions.

He moved toward the lock and with his elbows, he tried to knock the lock away. It was difficult, but eventually the lock loosened. He utilized his boots to break the lock completely and pulled the door open. Although he couldn't see a thing, he broke the chain tied around creature's ankle. He stepped back to face the being he'd just saved.

The unexpected creature fluttered out of its cell. Caspar had expected a humongous troll or some other beast. Instead, he found a gargoyle with big silver wings, small chunky legs, and big arms that made it difficult for the gargoyle to stand.

The wings allowed them to effortlessly suspend within the air. Long pointy ears, a conical nose, and a constant frown upon its forehead, which made him, look quite frustrated. The gargoyle smelled of dead rats. Caspar assumed that he might have been eating the ones inside its cell.

"That's a relief. You get claustrophobic inside that pit hole," the gargoyle quipped.

Caspar narrowed his eyes. "You are a baby gargoyle, aren't you?" "I am an elderly gargoyle."

"Don't lie. I know when someone lies."

"Hmmph." He crossed his arms. "My name is Balthazar, by the way." Caspar took the gargoyle's clawed hand and shook it. "Caspar Socrates." "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, Louis."

"Don't quote movie lines, nitwit. Now tell me, where's my satchel and my

cane?"

Balthazar pointed. "It's on the first floor."

Caspar ascended the stairs with Balthazar in tow. He carefully unlocked the door. He came to a narrow corridor, dimly illuminated by flickering lights. He moved along, treading silently. The corridor was furnished with oak wood with glimmering patterns upon it, several small burnt patches interposed in the design, here and there. This was perhaps because of the hexes beaming at other places than the intended target.

Witches are whining creatures with insane problems, he mused.

They indulge themselves in dark magic, enabling them to channel power, so strong and so deadly, that sometimes they evaporate into oblivion. Witches existed from the start of the mankind and used methods of manipulating humans into killing

each other. The witches were largely criticized in folklores and fables and had been known across the world. Though the true characteristics of the witch was never truly known. None of it was mentioned in books, televisions, or movies.

Witches aren't really beautiful with smooth skin and sparkling eyes. They are mutants who practice occult and magic. They are usually ugly and skinned in their true form. It is only the exterior beauty that hides their abnormality that they mask with spells and crafted charms.

"It's there." Balthazar tilted his head toward the door.

Caspar opened it and went inside with Balthazar still following closely. He could see weapons, from wands and staffs to battle blades and gemmed daggers. Some were hanged by tight ropes, while others were placed inside glass cupboards. Some hung on the wall. The room was brightly lit, giving the weapons a steely shine. His eyes fell upon the table where his satchel and cane were kept.

He picked them up and strapped the satchel diagonally across his chest so that it rested against his hip. He picked up the cane, handed a dagger to Balthazar, and exited the room, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Where is the leader of this coven?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "What do you mean?"

"The leader. Every coven has a mistress who judges and issues the magic done here. Who is it? What is her name?"

"Delirium," the gargoyle replied automatically.

"Oh. Hmmm...Listen, Balthazar, I don't really know you, but when you escape from here, can you wait for me outside? This house is adjacent to a forest that stretches close to a flyover. I need you to be on the flyover and wait for me there. If I don't come within half an hour, you have to go to Maple Street and find Socrates

Manor. There you will find Lazarus, my butler. You need to tell him that I am not going to come and I am dead."

"I am not going to do that. I am not crazy."

"Gargoyles are assets. I have assisted you. I now have full control over you. You have to listen to my orders and obey them for one day. That is the obligation gargoyles must abide by for the person who has saved them, or else their spirits won't go to the land of peace."

"Not every gargoyle is superstitious and believes that if they adhere to the duties requested by their benefactor they will go to land of peace." He paused. "But I am not one of the dissenters." He sighed. "What are you going to do?"

He winked. "I'll find out that question's answer, soon."

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Delirium was once a rookie in the early eighteenth century. In this coven, she was now the mistress. Behind the green hair and blue eyes, the mask she wore to hide her old age, was a crumpled old lady with one broken eye. She possessed a lean body, a womanly voice, and poisoned looks.

She never wanted to be a part of Manfred's conspiracies, but she had no choice. She needed her coven to stand firm when the Morningstar was freed. No matter the outcome, she had to assist Manfred in getting what he wanted.

It had been just two days since he had arrived. He'd specified that he needed a demon slaughterer, Spring Heeled Jack, to be summoned. In return, the Morningstar would give his blessing. They had helped him, keeping the rookies in the dark as to

what was happening around and providing them with false information. Yet she wondered if such actions were prudent.

Tossing and turning, she found she couldn't sleep. Putting on her twinkling robe, she walked to the common room. There she came across a tall, lean, bronze-eyed boy in a trench-coat standing close to the fireplace, trying to fiddle with the erupting flames.

"Hello, Delirium," Caspar said coldly as he turned to gaze at the witch. "How did you escape?" She wasn't shocked, but she did sound astounded.

"That shouldn't concern you." His nose flared outward. "What should concern you is that you are meddling with the wrong man."

Delirium took a deep breath. "I don't care how evil Manfred is."

"He's not evil, Delirium. He is the evil," he replied. "You don't have any idea what you are dealing with. Please, tell me, why did he want a demon slaughterer?"

"He's going to raise the Morningstar and bring his kingdom upon the lands and seas. In return of our gratitude, he will grant us rewards and more powers."

"He's trying raise the devil?" "Yes."

That makes sense, he thought.

He clenched his fist and then released it. He strode toward Delirium and walked past her. She whirled around to face him, feeling a tad perplexed.

"Thank you for the vital information you've provided me with," he said as he neared the door

Delirium remained rooted in place without lifting a finger. She could have snapped her fingers and pinned him to the wall. She could have burnt him alive. Yet she did nothing.

“And one more thing, Delirium. Never try to trap me again.” His voice was sharp and cold. “If you value your existence, you’d do well to remember that.”

Pr ince of Hell

Balthazar waited at the flyover. It was a long and narrow white painted road raised above the ground with grills for safety on opposite sides. The darkness engulfed the gargoyle, as he stood suspended in the air with a grumpy expression on his face.

He could see the big, house and its chimney in the middle of the dark forest. He wasn't sure as to how much time had passed. Perhaps the thirty minutes were over, he surmised. He'd need to go to Maple Street. He turned about as a sudden wave of shock pushed at him.

Instead of a wooden house, he saw a big ball of fire. Wood, cement – even the stone was burning. Planks from doors and furniture and metal fell from great heights. The madness continued. Women were trying to throw themselves out of the windows, burnt with the magic on their face fading slowly. Witches hurried out through the doors, unsuccessfully trying to extinguish the fire and turning into ashes.

"Nice view," a gravelly voice spoke from behind him. It was Caspar.

"You did this?"

"It wasn't me. It was the rabbit," he responded. "How did you...?"

"They had gelatin, explosives in canisters. I just lit them all." "Oh."

"You waited? Good. I have to go now."

Balthazar pursed his stony lips. “Yeah, okay. You know, I can help you. You saved me, so as a superstitious gargoyle, I need to help you until you relieve me of my duties. So, you know...uh...would you need a gargoyle’s help?”

Caspar started walking, leaning on his cane. He looked back to find the befuddled gargoyle waiting for his answer. “I can you use an extra hand. After all, I am going to save the world.”

He wasn’t aware of the fact that some of the gargoyles can turn themselves invisible. Balthazar was one of the few. It was early morning, around six a.m., when they slipped into the city transport train and headed toward Maple Street. Caspar sat at the far end, away from several humans who looked drunk and baffled. The train was almost empty.

As it stopped, people got out one by one, until only Caspar and Balthazar remained. Balthazar was trying to entertain him by sharing some Russell Peters jokes. Unfortunately, he was feeling edgy as he leaned on his cane. He spent his time looking out the window to screen the end of the tunnels.

“You got a friend, I see?”

The voice was familiar. Caspar and Balthazar turned to face Death. He sat opposite to them, his slender arm comfortably wrapped over the seat.

“He’s my assistant,”

“I am not an assistant!” Balthazar argued.

“You do remember that I burnt a witch’s lair, don’t you?” Balthazar gave him an uncertain smile.
“Assistant, it is.”

“Oh, how sweet! A husband and wife fighting over house issues!” Death muttered. “Listen, Snoop dog, do you trust your lad here?”

Caspar stared at Balthazar who was now visible due to the isolation on the train. They exchanged glances as if Caspar was trying to size him up. Was Balthazar loyal? Is he trustable? Or is he not? The sharp glint in the gargoyle's eyes hinted that he was no trouble. He would offer no interference.

"I do,"

"Who the hell are you, eh? What makes you question me?" Balthazar scoffed. "Hmmm. I am the one who decides whether you live or not," Death said

coldly. "I am Death." His expression was thunderous as he assessed the gargoyle. "Death? Oh, Death! You are Death, aye? That's...I am sorry. You know,

I...am...so...so sorry. High five – what about it, eh?" He swallowed a lump. "Please, don't...Pl – Please don't kill me. I meant no disrespect."

"That is what I needed to hear. Good." He slammed his palms together, rubbing them as if to make them warmer. He faced Caspar. "You completed the job. Good. Burning the house filled with frustrated women who practice magic was brilliant, but there's something else that's come up. I need you and your little friend to come with me. There's someone I need you to meet."

"I can't," Caspar objected. "I have to do something else."

Manfred Croft – he had to stop him before he killed the other three he had referred to. Though he had no idea in how to begin his search. He had an idea, but he couldn't anyone to interrupt his plans. Not even the one person who could take his soul.

"I can't execute any more of your duties right now. Something has come up that I want to get rid of."

"I know who you are talking about, Caspar. Manfred

Croft." Casper swallowed his next retort, burning with

hatred.

“How do you know about him?”

“The one who is going to meet us knows something about Manfred. Something more than you and I know. If you have some grudge against him, you can fulfill it. Avail yourself of the vital information he is going to provide you.”

His path grew clearer. He’d wanted a start to his search and had promptly gotten one.

“All right, who is the guy we are meeting?” Caspar grinned with excitement. Death looked around to make sure there was no one around. He opened a

portal with many colors intertwined together. Several hymns hummed and buzzed. Death was the first go through the gateway with Caspar and Balthazar in tow. The portal imploded into pure smoke once the three were on the other side.

Instead of a narrow staircase, they were now within an apartment. It reminded Caspar of his apartment, though this one was well furnished. He noticed old vintage pistols hanging on the walls. The floor was polished and glistening. A fireplace was burning, the iron grills keeping the flames in place. A red sofa was placed opposite to it. Two lamps were inches from the arms of the sofa and a Persian carpet covered the entire floor.

Something that resembled a skeleton, wearing a dark suit hovered near the yellow flames. The figure turned around to face the visitors. To Caspar’s surprised, the being had skin, though it was almost inside the raw bones of his body. Its eyes bulged out of their sockets and its hair was oiled and slicked back as if it were pasted upon the back of its. He was cold. The aura around him was chilling, causing the hairs on the back of Caspar’s neck to rise.

“Hello, Death,” he said, his voice devoid of any emotion. The tone was blatant and sour. “You brought Mr. Socrates and . . .” His eyes narrowed as his gaze fell upon Balthazar. “Who you might be?”

“Your humble servant, Balthazar.” The gargoyle bowed his head, though he knew he was never a humble servant to anyone.

“That is good. I hope Mr. Socrates has desired a pet for himself.” Balthazar gave him a crooked smiled, holding back the distaste bubbling

inside him.

Caspar stepped forward and said, “What do you know about Manfred Croft?” “Straight-forward, I see. Death, perhaps you made a deal with the right

person.”

A knowing smile broke out across Death’s face as he walked to the sofa. Caspar followed, while Balthazar remained in the same spot, unmoving. Caspar slid onto the sofa as Death stood close to the dancing flames.

The old man extended his hand toward Caspar. “I am Capernaum.” “He’s a demon,” Death added. “One of the ultra-demons,”

“Ultra-demon? I thought they were just the Seven Princes of Hell.” The seven Princes were the rulers of Hell. Mammon, Leviathan, Satan, and Lucifer and so on.

“Well, you can count me as the eighth one. Lucifer is no longer the Prince. He is the King now. A King who is trapped in Purgatory,” he said. “But I suppose we are not here to discuss that official matter.”

Caspar leaned upon his cane, anger rising within his eyes. “My patience is a tad thin, Capernaum. So if you have something to say, tell me now, because I don’t have time to chit-chat with you.” He looked around. “And if you want to chat, at least make your ambience more appealing. Your house seems more like a morgue.”

“He’s born like that,” Death explained. “It’s no worries.”

“I hope so.” Capernaum’s stare was singular and deadly. “Mr. Socrates is getting irritated so we will come to the point.” He took a deep breath, carefully considering his words. “Manfred Croft is trying to raise Lucifer.”

“Boring!” Caspar jumped to his feet. “I already know that.”

“What you might not know is how he is trying to bring Lucifer Morningstar from Purgatory, his eternal cage.”

Balthazar raised his hand. Everyone’s attention was drawn to him. “I thought that every means possible in awakening Lucifer has been banished or long forgotten?” he asked nervously.

“Not likely, gargoyle.” Capernaum rolled his eyes. “As a member of the Templar’s Order, I learned about Manfred’s intentions from the beginning. I later learnt that he’s using the forbidden way, which is known to only a few of us.”

While Death’s face was pale, it was now an even lighter shade. His eyes were weary, slightly obscured by the shadows of the room as he tried to contemplate the situation. Caspar noticed his uneasiness.

Caspar’s eyes narrowed and resembled the slits of a snake. “You know about this? About the forbidden way, don’t you, Death?”

Death remained quiet, but his eyes said too much.

“Might I ask, what is the forbidden way?” Balthazar queried. “I should have known!” Caspar replied.

“What is it?”

“Combining the elements of four transitions of djinns into one talisman,” Capernaum explained. “Forlock’s, Ifrit, Marid’s, and Kuffle’s,”

“Why now? If it was known by the few, why didn’t they use them a long time ago to bring back Lucifer?” Balthazar inquired.

“Because patience is the mother of might,” Caspar said. “It has happened . . .” He was not talking to Balthazar but to himself. “Manfred chose the right time. Djinns were almost extinct. The people...yes! I should have known! I should have! The people, the humans we thought were humans were actually djinns who lost their powers and their energy after the period of extinction, so they followed the ways of human-kind, living between them and being like them. They were the last.

“Aaron, a college boy to everyone, was actually one of the Kuffle’s or Marid’s. Perhaps he was one of other two, but...but . . .” He raised his finger, pointing madly. “But they were the last of their kind. Their remaining essence, if used together and condensed into one small fucking stone, will allow Lucifer to rise.”

“Yes, you got that right,” Capernaum replied.

Death was stunned. His lips quivered. His striking hair was no longer luxurious and he found himself in deep thought. “Only the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse knew about the forbidden way. I mistakenly slipped the truth to Capernaum one day, so he knows as well.”

“Mistakenly?” Caspar raised his brows in suspicion. “I think, perhaps, Capernaum has slipped, as well,” he replied forcefully, “to other people.”

“What are you implying, Mr. Socrates?”

“I am not implying. I am saying that you can be a traitor.” “Then you are wrong,”

“Am I?” Caspar chuckled arrogantly. “Tell me, why are you trying to prevent the rise of the creature that created you in the first place?”

“I have my reasons.”

“I am sure those reasons can be disclosed.” “I don’t think they can be.”

“Shut up!” Death growled, the fires blazing bright. “We are on the same side, so don’t act like idiots.”

Caspar took a deep breath to calm himself down. Shaking his hand to let the blood flow, he clasped his cane loosely. “What is your reason behind such prevention?” he asked with exasperation.

“I am trying to save myself,” Capernaum replied. “By betraying your own race?”

“Lucifer is not a demon. He is the creator of demons, but not a demon himself. He was an angel, an archangel, Mr. Socrates. He loved God. God loved him. He doesn’t...He doesn’t care about demons, like us. He doesn’t care about my brother, Leviathan, or my other brothers. For the time being, he is using us.

“You might know that Lucifer hated evil, but to achieve his goal, he can use demons as pawns and toss them aside later on with no regrets. I don’t want that to happen. The demons, the ultra-demons, they wouldn’t understand such conception of mine, but later, they will worship me because of what I’ll set into motion. I move according to the future, Mr. Socrates. And in future, I see the fate of hell in danger after Lucifer’s rise.”

“That’s a pretty badass speech!” Balthazar quipped as he interrupted the intimidating silence. “Oops. Sorry. I didn’t mean to...you know.”

“That also dissolves my suspicion. Thank you for the information. I must be going.”

“No, wait.” Death clasped his forehead in thought. He ran a hand through his hair and said, “You need to execute a job. Three djinns are dead, Caspar. They are

dead. Only one is left before they are able to perform the ritual. I need you to find the last djinn. You need to stop Manfred Croft before he wrecks the entire order of this world. You need to save the last djinn."

Caspar looked at Balthazar as he replied, "I am new here, but I live on this planet and I really don't fancy the thought of raising Lucifer so he could disturb the peace which I am granted here on Earth. So being superstitious or not, I am in."

"All right," Caspar said, a small smirk breaking across his face. "May I know where the last djinn is?"

***

It was Baphothem, the same goat-headed he'd seen not too long ago. He was sure of it. Standing several yards away in that diner was Baphothem. A pagan deity mistaken as the devil in many cultures. He shook his head, hoping that it was all a dream. But he knew he couldn't escape the demon as it silently crawled toward him.

Welcome to my world? What the hell does that mean?

Was he in some alternate universe where a diner is actually a personification of Earth and the humans are projections from the circuits of his subconscious, playing him and deluding him? It seemed real. Too real.

He rubbed his cheeks that had turned pink with warmth. He had this habit whenever he was nervous or frightened. Plain delight scratched his arm, his cheeks, his forehead, and his lips. He was sure it was not nervousness, but rather bafflement.

The people looked at him strangely. Some ignored him. Some continued to watch the game on TV. Caspar turned back, thinking they were figments of his

imagination. As he turned, he found no one there. The goat-headed demon had disappeared.

It was too much for him. He was the only who could see it. Yet now, he saw nothing. This was more than he had bargained for. He had never witnessed a creature of such mystery.

The booth on his right was empty. He approached it and sat down. He kept his head down on the table until he fell asleep. It was a weird thing, as he never had a habit of falling asleep in seconds. When he awoke, he found that the horizon was beautifully painted with the sun, an orange-colored pelt looking down upon the deserted mountains. A dark blanket of night soon rolled in with dusky clouds stringing their magnificent thunder across the odd diner.

Only few people were left. Families were gone and in their place stood men with strange behaviors and women in groups who talked non-stop about their nail polish and their make-up. The flavored smell of steak was now no more, but the bacon scent still lingered.

“If you don’t order anything, I am sorry, but I’ll have to kick you out.” The pregnant woman stood before him. “Oh, wait, I am not sorry, because I can’t say sorry.” She rolled her angry eyes at him.

“I – I . . .” He took the menu card from her and scanned it quickly. “Cheeseburger...I want a cheeseburger.”

“The diner is not open for twenty-four hours, so you better get your ass out of this place soon.”

Caspar looked at the menu and then back at the pregnant lady. If it wasn’t for her belly, she would have gotten a sound scolding from him, but he kept his retorts to himself.

“I ordered something,” he quipped. “There’s a saying, give the customer what they want. Right now, I really don’t see you giving the customer – me, what I’ve requested.”

Her cheeks flushed with color. She didn’t say anything, but Caspar could feel the heavy pounding of her heart thumping against her soft skin. She moved toward the counter without looking back.

Caspar’s burger soon arrived. With cheese between two buns and a steak, tomatoes on the sides, pickles, on top of the crust, he began eating. For some reason, he was hungry. He licked his fingers, trying to lick the ketchup off his fingers and hummed under his breath.

“Mmmm, mmm. This is good,” he said loudly toward the chef, who stared blankly at him.

He finished the burger and the plate was taken. He looked up as several chimes that only he could hear sounded, yet he wasn’t sure as to where they were coming from. Looking about, his gaze landed on a being standing in front of an obese man holding its human hands above the man. A grave look crossed Caspar’s face as he tried to decipher as to what the goat-headed man was actually doing.

He stood and walked forward. The demon didn’t pay attention to him. He didn’t even turn his head toward Caspar. He just stood there with his hand hovering above the fat man who was busy eating his oily food. Caspar kept his eyes on the both of them, preparing for what was going to happen. Granted, he was unsure as to what the demon was going to do.

It was intriguing. He was actually enjoying the mystery of how he had ended up there, not to mention how he was ruthless toward everyone in the diner. There was also the fact that a demon with the head of a goat and long intertwining horns was

visible to only him. It was fun, but at the same time, he felt alienated. He didn't belong there. He'd been plucked from Earth's pastures and thrown into the ruggedness of a desert.

What Caspar didn't see was that the demon was absorbing the energy around him. A sparkling, powdery substance floated into the air as it was withdrawn from the fat man and siphoned into the demon's palms. The small nodules were barely visible. The demon's eyes became a tad glassy as he dropped his hand. He moved closer to the man and breathed deeply to ingest the powder into his nostrils.

With a keen eye, Caspar saw that the man was near to fainting. His eyes were drooping, his hands weakening, the burger and the french fries dropping from his grasp. His lips quivered as his mouth began to dry and his cheeks grew pale. The demon drew himself back as he glanced in Caspar's direction. A wicked gleam shined with his eyes, as if to say, 'You are next.'

Caspar wasn't scared. His brows arched with determination and a muscle twitched along his jaw. He took a moment to assess the demon. Its shoulders were not broad, but low and weak. It sighed deeply and turned away. He didn't both to acknowledge Caspar. Instead, its aura was filled with tension and then he was gone.

He looked at the obese man. His eyes were wide open and his mouth twitched. He hit the ketchup filled plate and he seemed as if he were staring mindlessly at the floor. All his pulse, his heartbeat – they were gone. He was dead.

The pregnant lady stood beside him and shrieked, "Oh, damn!" Everyone's attention turned toward them.

"He did it! He is the one who killed the man," she cried as she pointed a finger pointed at Caspar.

Ca tch Me if You Dare

Caspar saw a river, which overlooked a big mansion. He was standing in a clearing with a blue sky above and leaves all around as he slowly descended to the ground. Flocks of pigeons dotted the sky, fluttering across the landscape. The river jostled at the bank, meandering, twisting, and splashing upon the rocks.

He saw monkeys, jumping from one tree to another. Balthazar was almost bitten by one of them along the way. Unfortunately, it lost its teeth as it tried to sink into the gargoyle's rocky body. He encountered flies of various kinds and insects that were trying to bite him, as well as stinging scorpions. Caspar walked ahead of him with his cane held high.

He still didn't know what the cane was for. Was it a weapon or was it...well...just a cane? En-route to his destination, he'd been in a bus with hippies. He'd tried all sorts of things to see if any of them worked, but there wasn't any button or anything mechanical that could turn the cane into something else. There was just a big S instead of a handle.

He came close to the river with Balthazar at his side and stood there as he waited for someone. Capernaum had insisted that his apprentice, a Nephilim, (it was strange, a demon having an apprentice who is half mortal, half angel), accompany them. He didn't need any help. He was never a person who needed someone's help. He didn't know why, either. He just disliked the company of people he wasn't familiar with, though Balthazar was an exception. Altogether, he wasn't really fond of newcomers.

He waited patiently. Patience. It was something he disliked. He would spit at patience, if it were an actual person. Yet because of patience, Manfred would soon be able to bring back Lucifer. Patience was important!

It was an easy plan. To save this Marid. Marid's are the highest order of djinns. They are made of water and are the strongest of all. They had to bring him to Capernaum's house where safety was of the highest order. Even Manfred could not enter there, unless he could somehow create a replica of himself, which was quite impossible.

Everything could go well if the Nephilim would arrive early. Yet he was taking his own time. Punctuality prevents chaos. That was Caspar's saying. If you are at the right time at the right place, you can play god. As he stood there waiting, his mind began to wander.

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"She is a very sweet girl," he said. "I am sure she is," Selena replied. "Do you think I am handsome?"

"I think you are the most handsome brother anyone would dream of." He rolled his eyes. "Don't joke, please."

"I am serious. You have golden eyes. That's actually quite hot." "Oh, I didn't know that. Golden eyes are in fashion or what?" "You look like a sweet baby vampire,"

"I thought vampires aren't sweet at all." "Apparently, fiction novels differ from you."

“I don’t like vampires. They scare me.”

“Someday, my little brother, they will be scared of you.” And then, she hugged him.

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Balthazar shook his shoulder and Caspar came to his senses. “Where has your mind wandered to?”

“It’s nothing that concerns you!” Caspar snapped and moved forward. “Dear lord, where is this Nephilim? You know what really bugs me, Balthazar?”

“Even if I say no, you’d still tell me. So . . .”

“An unfamiliar person whom I’ve never met is going to help us and that bugs me. There is one thing I have learned and it’s to never trust a person. Most especially one who has skin.”

“Why did you trust me, then?”

Caspar mumbled unintelligibly. Balthazar brought his ears close to hear what he was saying, but he couldn’t make sense of his words. Maybe they were curses, maybe they weren’t.

“I didn’t get you.”

“You can’t. Your hands are too small.”

“I didn’t mean – oh, leave it! Just answer me, why did you trust me?” “You are made of stone. Not skin,” Caspar replied. “You also look dumb.” “Excuse me?”

“Not excused!” He stepped forward, breathing heavily. “How much time would it take for that nitwit to come?”

Caspar wrapped a muffler around his neck. It was too hot to wear a muffler, but he didn't care. He used to wear this muffler as a lucky charm. It reminded him of someone he knew, someone he was close to. The person had knitted it especially for him. His mother...It seemed such a long time.

An unexpected voice broke through his reverie. "So you must be Caspar Socrates and this must be...the creature?"

"Balthazar."

"Um...yes."

To Caspar's amazement, things turned out to be completely unexpected. It was a girl's voice. He'd thought it was a boy who had been a Nephilim, but it was a girl.

She strode out of the forest. She was beautiful. That thought caught him by surprise. He never found a girl beautiful. He was straight, but he never did have a keen interest in the opposite sex. He thought of them as nothing more than distractions that could break your heart on occasion and leave you sobbing in a gutter. That didn't mean he didn't consider them attractive. He did. He just had a habit of guarding himself when it came to women.

As he stared at the Nephilim, he found her quite attractive. Perhaps it was the way she looked, cunning, mischievous, naughty, and wild. Or perhaps it was because of her cupid's face, round and chubby, with a slight touch of blush. Her lips were perfectly curved with a light red lipstick on it. Her big, deep eyes reminded him of the eyes of fish. Her hair was braided meticulously with knots and tails. She was tall, but not as he was. He stood a mere six-foot-three inches tall.

The Nephilim wasn't dangerous. At least, she didn't look dangerous. She looked like a model for Barbie; cute, yet strong. She wore a brown leather jacket

covering her tank top and shorts on her legs. A smooth carved dagger rested on her belt, dangling against her thighs.

She extended her hand toward him. “I am Ivy.”

Caspar was stunned. He found it hard to formulate what he wanted to say. He wasn’t one to blush or giggle shyly. In his eyes, it was atrocious to do. Yet he felt his cheeks grow warm. He tried to shrug off the feeling, but it was a bit difficult to do.

“Ah, I see,” he said as he stared at her hands as she held them before him. “Are you some fortune teller? You are seeing my future?”

“Oh, no, no. I see dirt and mud. Germs. I don’t want to get germs on my hands before we go into this mission.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. That’s perfectly normal coming from a person like you.” She chuckled and drew her hand back.

“What...? Was that sarcasm I heard?” he asked.

“Blah – blah,” she said in response, ignoring his query. “So, what is the plan?” He frowned. “Did – did she just ‘blah’ me?”

“Get in. Get the Marid and bring him back to Capernaum,” Balthazar said in hopes of diverting the tension that arose between them.

“Does the Marid know about our rescue operation?”

“Not really. They don’t contact anyone. They stay in their houses and do some strange magic stuff. They don’t care about anyone else on Earth. So we might have to

. . .”

“Kidnap him.”

“Sort of. He doesn’t know what’s coming at him. We can try persuading him, but then it’s a rare probability he will listen to us.”

Ivy snorted. “That’s ugly. We’ll try the other option for now. If he doesn’t listen, we’ll have to force him.”

“I am the captain here,” Caspar replied before they set off toward the mansion, sticking his nose up into air.

“All right, Mister Captain? What is your plan?” Ivy asked and grinned. “We’ll do what you said. Now, off we go!” He moved forward, trudging

deeper into the woods.

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The mansion’s door loomed in front of Caspar. Ivy and Balthazar were staring resolutely at it, too. Caspar instructed Balthazar to make himself invisible in hopes of not upsetting the djinn.

“He won’t let us enter if he finds out I’m a Nephilim and there is an invisible gargoyle in the air?” Ivy cursed. “How should we do this then?”

“Just follow my lead,” he replied. “And one more thing before we set off, don’t try to get killed!”

He nodded at his companions and knocked upon the door. He waited. No one answered. He knocked again, this time with his cane. Someone peeped through the keyhole. An eye belonging to an old man with white lashes gazed back at them.

“What is it you kids want?” The voice was that of a frustrated eighty-year-old

man.

“Well, hello!” Caspar said cheerfully. Ivy and Balthazar looked surprised by the sudden change of his tone and his behavior. “My name is Caspar Socrates and this is my fiancée, Ivy. Our car broke down out on the road. We are getting no signal here.

We saw your house and we thought of coming to you. I need to make a call and apologize for the intrusion. It would just take a minute, sir."

The eye blinked several times. It looked at Caspar's smiling face with suspicion. "Just one phone call?" the old man asked.

"Indeed," he replied.

Ivy gave him her best actress smile. "All right."

The eye vanished. They heard several pops and the sound of something sliding. The door opened to reveal a man with a crooked back and red spots across his face. He waved them forward and walked slowly behind them.

"There is the phone," he said. "Make your call and get out."

"That's a really harsh way to treat strangers," Caspar commented with a grin. "Yes, well, you are strangers," the old man replied.

"Strangers who know you." Caspar's beaming smile and his cheerful nature vanished quickly. He stepped forward, his golden eyes cold. "Marid."

The old man's mouth dropped opened with disbelief. "Who are you people?" "Make yourself visible, Balthazar."

Balthazar appeared. The old man moved back as he ogled the gargoyle suspended in the air. He was awed by what he saw. "You are...um...You are a gargoyle!"

"Don't try to act foolish, old man. We know you are the djinn," Caspar said gruffly.

"All right, all right!" the old man replied. "I am...I am the last of the Marid's." His black eyes slowly dissolved. White pupils shone brightly. "You guys...You are a

hunter. Now I remember. I have heard of you." His voice changed and became a tad boyish. "Where? Where? Where? Ah yes! You are the famous hunter."

His wrinkled skin, which looked like crumpled paper, started to change. The lines and marks faded and soft, fair skin formed.

"Why are you here?"

His freckled bald head sprouted big, bushy hair. The transformation from an old man to a boy was ending. His crooked back grew straight and lean. His waistcoat, shirt, and low-cut pants changed into a t-shirt with a lantern on it, brown jeans, and comfy slippers.

Ivy came forward, her hand raised, a sign of surrender. "We need to talk to you. There's something going on."

"You lot killed my brothers." The Marid's face was calm, yet anger roiled within his white eyes. "You were the ones who murdered them."

Balthazar chuckled. "You got it wrong. It wasn't us."

"You thought you can come here in front of me and kill me! Let me remind you. I am a Marid. My brothers didn't hold the powers. They were weak, pathetic. But me? I still have many long forgotten powers and I can do wonders."

"Splendid!" Caspar mused. "We all want three wishes, genie. Would you mind granting them to us?"

"You are trying to disrespect me?"

"In my defense, my lad, I never respected you in the first place." He brought his cane forward, holding it in front of him as if it were a weapon.

The djinn didn't say more. He moved back as if getting ready to pounce at Caspar. His lips murmured words, syllables. It was Latin. He was sure of it. Balthazar and Ivy exchanged glances. He saw Ivy pull out a sapphire and ruby dagger. She was

preparing herself for what was to come. He stood calmly with no weapon, whatsoever, except for the cane within his hand. He still had no idea as to how to use it to his advantage.

A spark was moving around the Marid until a whirlpool formed. Perhaps it was a light. Perhaps it was a tiny fairy floating in air. Nevertheless, Caspar understood what it was. Before he could issue forth a proper explanation, the Marid slowly faded within the whirlpool, his face faint within the sunlight.

"He's teleporting. Follow me," he said and leapt forward.

Balthazar's claws bit into his ankle as Ivy hung onto the gargoyle. The multi-color swirls of the teleportation were blinding him, choking him. He closed his eyes. The movement of winds around them started to dissipate. He could feel the teleportation ending. He fell to the ground. Balthazar crashed into his back and spasmed. Ivy landed on top of Balthazar.

Caspar pushed them away and used his cane to push himself to his feet. He looked around in search of the petty djinn. He tried to make sense of his surroundings. It took some time for Balthazar to constrict and begin floating. Ivy dusted her tank top and flaring jacket. She came to stand beside Caspar and stared in the direction he was looking at. He was silent and imposing. His pale lips were pressed together. His angular cheekbones slightly flushed. His beaky nose, like that of a sparrow, sniffed the air as if trying to catch the scent of the djinn.

"So what should we do?"

The footsteps trampled nearby. Caspar knew what he had to do. He ordered Ivy and Balthazar to follow him into an alley. He saw a big sign with the word, BAR, written across it. He saw someone enter the establishment and was sure that the

shadow was familiar. He entered the bar. Balthazar remained outside in case the djinn tried to escape.

The bar was dark. People bustled inside, sitting down on chairs, talking with beers in their hands. Some sat at the counter where the bartender made cocktails for them. There were many people and the light was dim. It would have been impossible for anyone to find a boy with white eyes within that atmosphere.

Caspar had a bit of trouble in finding the djinn. In the midst of humans, who were drunk and did not have the slightest of idea of what was going on, the Marid sat a table with a girl, talking and flirting. His smile was vicious and coy. The girl was older than him, but something attracted her toward the Marid. That was the best part about being supernatural entities. You were able to trigger human minds with ease, as their minds were still in the primitive age. Caspar, on the other hand, had perfected the art of not letting anyone to get inside his head.

He approached the table and patted the Marid's back. "Hello."

The Marid stared up at him. He remained frozen in place, surprise staining his

face.

"Shoo," Caspar said to the girl.

His fixed gaze moved her into action and she scurried away. He turned back to stare at the Marid who gave him a mannequin smile. Ivy appeared, moments later and sat down in the previously occupied chair.

"You think we are your enemies," she said. "We aren't. We are the ones who have the best intentions to help you."

"How can I trust you?"

"We will give information that will surpass your doubts and suspicions."

Ivy enthralled the djinn by giving him the vital information as to why they were there and who'd murdered all of his brothers in hopes of gaining his allegiance. "The demon slaughterer, Spring Heeled Jack, can come any time to fetch and kill you in hopes of getting your essence. For that, you have to come with us, so that we can protect you from him. We must prevent Manfred from getting your essence so that his ritual doesn't work."

Caspar stood close to the table, looking around in search of anyone suspicious. Anyone could be Spring Heeled Jack. Music played throughout the room and the wavering lights danced. People were moving their bodies, sweat dripping from their tired foreheads. Their hair grew damp as their bodies moved with each other.

Within the dancing crowd, a boy with blond hair falling across his eyes walked slowly. His lips curled as he moved, step by step, only to realize that he was aiming for Marid. Caspar brought his cane down without any hesitation across his diaphragm. He groaned as Caspar pulled him across the bar and strode outside toward Balthazar who was busy smoking a cigar.

"Where did you get that?" Caspar asked. "Just...you know, here and there."

Caspar didn't bother to ask more. He pushed the blond-haired boy against the wall, pinning his wrists tightly above his head. He hit him once again. Before he could speak, the boy spat blood because of his now broken jaw.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he cried, tears trickling down his cheeks. Caspar drew his finger against the boy's bloody teeth to find that he was

wearing plastic fangs. He wasn't Spring Heeled Jack, he realized with regret. He was a wannabe vampire. "Why were you trying to be a vampire?"

“Chicks dig it,” was his only reply. “After the vampire books, you know girls purposely go to pubs and bars, to find...umm...vampires. I fool them by acting like a real vampire.”

“Which you are not.” Caspar gritted his teeth together and left him there as he lay huddled against the wall, crying. “And what the hell is that?” He found something sticky on his fingers. “Sparkles make-up...Are you wearing glitter?” he asked with disgust.

“Vampires sparkle and chicks dig that, too.” “Do you want to see a complete idiot?”

The feeble boy didn’t answer. “Look at the mirror.”

The boy hurried away without any further delay into a side alley. Balthazar became visible once more.

“That was…harsh,” he said as he threw the cigar down and crushed it with his small feet.

“Have they ever seen a vampire? They don’t...Well, they don’t wear gothic costumes like that kid was wearing. And they certainly don’t wear glitter, for all I know. Vampires are dangerous and have big talons and wings with which they use to catch their prey while flying and not with seduction techniques. That’s completely preposterous!”

“Oh, yes, I agree.” He puffed. “One thing I don’t understand is that I have heard Spring Heeled Jack is connected to a source. The source is not here. So how will you be able to kill him if he comes?”

“Finishing off the source is an easy way to kill Spring Heeled Jack. The difficult way is . . .”

“By kicking his ass!”

The door swung open to reveal the Marid. Ivy appeared behind him, trying her best to persuade him. The Marid’s face was full of anger and despair. He didn’t use any teleportation techniques or force winds. He just stood there as Ivy stated her case.

“You have to come with us,”

“What if you are manipulating me?”

Caspar sighed. He didn’t like this. This was too much. Every second counted. Every minute did. The Marid was trying to prolong things, trying to get some surety out of Ivy. It was strange the way she was pleading with the Marid to listen to her, to believe her. Initially, he thought she was a strong fighter with a straight aim. Yet he knew that everyone wore a mask in order to cover their true nature. He knew this because he wore a mask, too.

“We have to force you, then.” This time, she wasn’t begging. Her voice was commanding and slightly husky.

“You will not.”

The djinn didn’t bother to bring forth a whirlpool with which to teleport. Instead, he sprinted away. His attempted was unexpected, but Caspar had read about djinns. When they drain their powers more, they became vulnerable like humans. It was a good thing. It would take less energy in bringing the djinn to Capernaum.

The alleyway’s lamp burned bright in the beautiful sky light before it exploded into darkness. They were all surprised by the sudden implosion. Caspar stumbled forward to find the djinn had stopped running. He was no longer smiling. His expression was different. It was deathly.

“Tell him about Death, aye? It would scare the hell out of him and he’ll surely believe,” Balthazar laughed.

Ivy shook her head. “He just believes we are plotting all of this. Thanks, Caspar Socrates, for that, as he doesn’t believe us.”

“Why me?” Caspar asked with confusion as he glanced at Ivy.

“You are the hunter. You hunt creatures. You have already killed so many of them. You have become famous. He thinks you are the murderer. Thank you so much, Mister Socrates,” she growled.

“My pleasure.”

The djinn smiled as he turned around. Two pairs of claws sliced through the djinn’s chest, straight through his heart, drenching the street with scarlet blood, dripping thick like a ribbon floating in air. The claws tore through flesh and bone, shredding them completely. The scent of blood could be smelled from yards away.

Balthazar flew toward the looming shadow with its shiny claws. Caspar withdrew a blade from within his satchel. He tossed the cane and the satchel aside as it was interfering with his combat movement. The corpse lay before them, but the shadow had gone. He stared at it with dismay. Balthazar sniffed.

“He didn’t listen to us!” Caspar said. “And now look at him. He’s lying down, broken.”

The pair of claws appeared, intent of latching on to Caspar’s coat. Ivy moved to deflect the movement with her dagger. She rolled over and kicked the ashy-looking demon’s leg from behind him. The talons were far more ferocious than she had imagined. Long and serrated, they swiped at Ivy’s hair. The red streaks glistened. Caspar took the opportunity to shove his blade inside the demon.

The blade had no effect on it. The demon groaned and shrugged its shoulders in hopes of pushing Ivy back. Spring Heeled Jack brought his hooks near her, his nails glowing slightly. Balthazar kicked out, hitting the demon across its back. The

demon’s hat flew into the air, revealing his bald head and a waxy, disfigured face. It roared and came forward to attack Caspar, but stumbled as Balthazar initiated another kick. The demon snarled, showing his fangs. It avoided Balthazar’s next attack. Grabbing hold of the gargoyle, it threw him across to the other side. Balthazar slammed into the wall and dropped into an open garbage can nearby.

Spring Heeled Jack leapt from one building to another. It was too fast, making it difficult for Ivy and Caspar to follow his movements. He tossed Caspar’s blade aside and pushed him down the wall with the intention of beating his heart out of his chest. It then shattered the gems of Ivy’s blade. His movements were so quick that she didn’t have time to think about her next move.

Caspar pressed himself again the wall and carefully made his way toward his bag and his cane. He was on alert, prepared for the demon’s next attack. Spring Heels Jack waited. Silence descended upon them. Ivy kept to the shadows so that she would not be noticed. Blood dripped down her forehead. She felt herself lifted and soon hung upside-down within the demon’s clutches. Ivy stared at the demon’s stitched mouth. She was positive that it was smiling at her.

Caspar retrieved his cane and satchel, digging through it for something suitable to use. He had daggers, chalks, knives, and a boomerang. He grabbed the boomerang and threw it across the alley. Its edges carved into the demon’s flesh, black blood pouring from the jagged gashes.

It moaned and tossed Ivy aside as if she were a toy. Her body forcefully slammed into the wall, giving her a memorable ache. She dropped to the ground, spasms of pain searing her body all the way to her spine. Her eyes and cheeks were swollen. A small cut grazed her skin. Her eyes closed as she lay still.

Caspar held his cane tight as if it was his own heart, his own soul. He would never let go of it. The demon was strong, way strong than any other demons he'd encountered. He was invulnerable to blades and magic. His eyes shot to the cane.

Use it when in need.

Well, he needed now. Death should have told him how to use it. On top of that, he should have asked him while they'd been at Capernaum's house. Alas, he had forgotten. He couldn't lament that fact now. More important matters had to be solved first and the cane's use had not been his priority until now.

He could hear cold whispers calling out to him. It was as if the angels from heaven had descended with their hands stretched forward and called out Caspar's name.

"Come to us! Come to us!"

No! No! He was dead once. He didn't want to die again. The feeling of being dead was quite terrible.

S.

The S had something to do with it. He was sure of it. It wasn't just simply crafted to signify Socrates. The cane served a purpose. He just needed to discover what it was. He pulled, pushed, and twisted it. He tried every action he could think of. The sound of the claws clicking together disturbed the silence.

As Caspar fiddled with the cane, it started to deform. He wasn't sure as to how it happened. Perhaps it was because he'd twisted the handle. He must have activated a hidden mechanism. The cane started to glow brightly, causing Caspar to press his hand in front of his eyes. The glow blinded the demon. He stepped back, unsure as to what had happened.

The bottom of the cane started to burn softly as if were a torch of some sort. He opened his eyes. The cane was glowing softly and he could see that the cane's size and shadow had changed. It had a hilt now, made of rubbery leather connected to a long, twisted blade in a shape of a question mark. The cane had become a shotel.

It looked like a big crane attached to a hilt. He saw something dripping from the edge of the blade and touched it. The water, or perhaps the silver blood, was warm and smooth. Caspar had seen that kind of blood. The shotel was made out of an angel's blood, bones, and flesh. Which meant the weapon could battle and devour a demon of any kind.

It didn't take a lot of time for Spring Heeled Jack to lurch towards Caspar. This time, he was ready for the attack. The demon's claws clanged together as he reached at Caspar. The shotel's end plummeted through its chest. The black blood brightened as it was smeared on the blade's sharp edge. The demon snarled in agony.

The smoke around the demon clouded, swirling into a mini-tornado. It misted and within seconds, the demon burst into papery white ash. The smell the rotten of blood dizzied him and churned his stomach.

Foregoing a groan, he smiled and called out to his companions, "Are you okay?"

Balthazar's head popped out of the dustbin. "I fainted. What did I miss?"

Caspar laughed loudly. He could hear Ivy's faint laugh as well. The sound was soft and gentle. Leaning against the wall, he pushed himself to his feet, holding his hand around his stomach. He grabbed his shotel and twisted the S. It didn't glow as much as before. The shotel contracted and became a cane once more. He walked toward a wounded Ivy, concerned that she was unable to move.

Balthazar had incurred some cuts and injuries over his ankle, his knee, and his elbow. They slowly started to heal. That was the best part about being a gargoyle. You never had a permanent damage.

Caspar knelt beside Ivy as she shivered in the moonlight. Her lips looked thicker and her cheeks were pale. Several swollen areas bulged out of her skin. He hadn't realized she'd been hurt so badly. Seeing her tired face and so broken down, he found himself pitying her. All he could think of was to embrace her and kiss her upon the forehead. Yet he knew it wouldn't be the Socratic method. To do so went against everything he stood for.

"We kicked his ass, guys." She gave a small smile. It proved difficult for her as her jaw, her teeth, even her entire face was pained. She managed it, none-the-less, to show her companions a bit of optimism in face of such adversity.

"Good lord, you are hurt bad." Caspar wasn't sad. He wasn't concerned. Or was he trying not to be concerned? "Now, we can't take you to the hospital, because we then have to give explanations of those injuries to the doctor."

"C – Capernaum has some healing spell books and some herbs and flowers, too. I will be fine."

Balthazar supported her as they pulled her to her feet.

"We couldn't save the djinn. We messed up. Lucifer is going to rise and . . ." She was going to cry, but did everything possible to hold her tears back. She

gulped and tamped her emotions down.

Caspar had been wrong. Ivy was a strong girl. Way stronger than him.

Pa in

Death hadn’t been there. He hadn’t arrived. He had gotten the news from Capernaum about the mission, but he didn’t go to meet Caspar as he had some work to do. After all, he had souls to count and reap.

As for Capernaum, he made a paste out of herbs and fresh fruits and applied it to Ivy’s wounds to heal her. The medicine’s effects made her drop into a deep sleep. She’d be well again soon enough.

Capernaum strode out of the room and shit the door behind him. His eyes were sullen within their sockets. His nose became a bright yellow color and his ears grew purple. He was sulking. Or perhaps it was the cool fresh air of the sunrise, which made him look so.

He didn’t show the pessimism in his expression, but he did look disappointed. Caspar was sitting at the dining table, hands clasped together and his thumbs resting against his parted lips. Balthazar was standing near the window, looking outside, his claws curled around a burning cigar. The ashes slowly scattered to the floor.

Capernaum sat wrapped in silence, as if trying to find correct words to begin the conversation. It was one they should have had when they’d arrived, but Ivy needed attention and took precedence over everything else.

“What happened there?”

“The Marid was uncontrollable. He didn’t listen. When we tried to catch him, he escaped only to get slaughtered. We then had to face that demon.”

“The last of djinns has gone as well. We are in great danger now.”

“We are not sure his essence was taken,” Balthazar cut in. “Well...uhh...we didn’t see anything squeezed out of him.”

“Well, it doesn’t work like that way, gargoyle,” Capernaum snapped with anger. “When a djinn dies, his essence is transferred to the demon who killed it and that is . . .”

“Manfred Croft,” Balthazar mumbled with embarrassment and grew quiet. “That is the reason. He had the source which should have been in the witch

house, in the first place, so he could get the essence, one by one.”

Caspar slowly grasped the situation with sudden realization. “Because whoever has the source makes Spring Heeled Jack it’s owner.”

Capernaum didn’t say more. What else was there to say? Caspar ran a hand through his thick hair with agitation. They had lost to Manfred. He just couldn’t believe it. Manfred Croft was going to raise Lucifer.

“When the true son of evil walks the lands, Hell shall be cast down on Earth and Water.”

Caspar had heard this saying about Lucifer from a demon he had previously slaughtered when he was sixteen. Back then, he didn’t know who the Morningstar was. Lately, he had every detail as to who he was in front of him.

“He is the one who created evil in the universe. He is the devil. With his flesh and his bones, he created every part of Hell.”

Caspar got up. He saw Capernaum lost within his own, despaired thoughts. He strode toward the door and opened it. The fragrance of the soothing candles assailed his nostrils. Silence continued to surround him. He looked at Ivy as she lay with her eyes closed, the bed sheet tucked over her body. Her face looked troubled, as if she was having a strong nightmare. One she wanted to escape yet was unable to, for one reason or another. Her hands clenched the sheet, clutching it tightly. Her brows arched and her lips quivered with sudden ferocity.

He approached her and knelt down beside her. She had risked her life for this mission and almost gotten killed. For all she'd done, they hadn't succeeded. He observed her as if she were a lab rat trying to find its course. He sat there watching her until her eyes opened, slowly and steadily, revealing those black pupils.

"What are you doing here, hotshot?" Ivy said, her voice weak and barely audible.

He leaned forward to better grasp her words. His face didn't soften. He could have given her some sympathy, but he was too reluctant to do so. He pursed his lips and said, "How are you feeling?"

"Much better than a demon kicking your ass,"

"There's one thing I don't understand, Ivy," he replied. "Why do you always find optimism in everything, eh? You almost got killed, yet you tried to smile. Right now, I know how much you are in pain, but still, you are trying to joke. Why? If it was me, I would have lashed out somehow." He didn't believe the words, but that was the truth.

"That's the difference between you and me, hotshot. I have learnt this...one thing." She found it difficult to speak. "When you know your life is going to be short, why not enjoy the little things you have for now?" She paused, coughed, and then resumed speaking. "I am a Nephilim. I was born for battles, because that's what Nephilims do. They fight.

"Their lives are short as they die during their teenage years, mostly. Some of them live, but that's just a probability. The ones who prolong their lives by not indulging themselves in these matters, these supernatural matters, their deaths are worse because they are not going according to the order. Being a Nephilim is a tough

job. It’s about survival. I am surviving right now. I can die anytime. So why not enjoy the small things you have?”

Caspar snorted mechanically. “Eh? That thought is just absurd.”

Ivy laughed. Caspar noticed the flush of red that broke out across her round, soft cheeks. “You are like a robot.” She moved closer to Caspar, her eyes narrowed at him. “You are a human. As far as I know, you should be graduating now. But here you are, talking to a half angel while some maniac is raising the devil. Unlike me, you can have a normal life, have kids, have family, have a wife, and have a life. Why are you like this? Why are you doing this? What’s your past? What’s your story?”

“I never had a past. I never will.” Darkness crept into Caspar’s eyes. “I am a person with no story.”

“You are lying.” She shook her head, refusing to believe a single word he said. “That’s what people do, Ivy. They lie.” A hint of a smile crossed his face, but

it wasn’t full of joy or sadness. Instead, there was confusion. “Because that’s what makes them strong. It makes them hide the emotions they have put a lid on, because that’s what they are good at.”

She regarded him with veiled eyes. “Why are you hiding from yourself?” She placed her hands upon his cheek. It was cold and scarred. “Why don’t you tell me who you really are?”

“I am a maniac just like Manfred.”

“No, no. No, you aren’t. Manfred is evil. You aren’t.” “What makes you so sure?”

“Nothing. I just have my beliefs.”

“Belief? Pfft. Never have any beliefs! They always have a knack of getting you in trouble.”

“You aren’t evil. You weren’t born one. I am sure of it.”

Her hands tightened upon his cheeks. For some reason, she didn’t want to pull them back. She wanted to keep her hands there, to comfort him, to show that someone him that someone cared and to somehow make him feel secure.

“People aren’t born evil, Ivy. Time makes them one.” He grabbed her hands and pushed them gently to the bed.

He stood and looked down at her and her hair streaked with red at the ends. He didn’t smile. He stared at her with a sense of hope losing on his side. “I think you should rest now. Balthazar and I will try to find Manfred and hopefully glean as to where he is doing the ritual.”

“No,” she said. “I am going.”

“Why do people always tend not to do what they are told to do?”

“You can’t pull your ass to the ritual without my help, hotshot. So buckle up because I am more than just all right.” She got up to find herself dressed in loose pajamas. “After I change my clothes, of course.” She shyly looked down.

Caspar turned around and hurried to the door to tug it open. “Change your clothes. I will be waiting outside.”

With a sly smile on her face, she said, “Or you can stay here and watch me change clothes.” She was trying really hard not to laugh out loud.

He narrowed his eyes. “That would be preposterous.”

“You look really cute when you do that eye thing,” she chuckled mischievously.

Caspar didn’t know what to say. Should he reply? No. To his understanding, he shouldn’t. She was flirtatious and liked playing with him. Of that he was sure.

Before he exited the room, he replied, “Ivy, I’ll never be able to enjoy little things, even if I am facing death. I never will be.”

She offered him an energetic smile. “I’m not sure as to what to say to that,” she said.

“I’ll leave you to your own devices. Ciao for now.” With that said, he closed the door behind him.

It ’s All About Fun

The cemetery was unlike any other. Overhead, the red sky burned bright behind inky clouds. The oak trees facing the graves were bent, as if they were doting fathers attending to their little children. The pasture and the green fields were endless, extending toward the horizon and a cathedral sat close to the graveyard, blotting the remaining open space.

Manfred walked about, his hair as thorny as ever. His face was ashy and plain with a big smile plastered across his face. His eyes seemed to sink deep within his sockets and he wore a gleaming silver suit with a black tie hung about his neck.

Behind him, two winged demons with long tilted ears and intertwining tattoos walked like guards they were. They looked around, their posture upright. Manfred’s gait was casual and moved freely with no worries whatsoever.

It wasn’t long before he saw the demon. It was digging the grave, its eyes blinking in an uncertain way. Its hair was untidy and its tattoos weren’t Enochion. They were just a bunch of mixed up symbols that were mostly seen in demonology. It wore loose clothes, a coat, and pants. When it saw Manfred grimacing at it, the demon scurried toward him like a desperate rat. It shoved its hands into its mouth, trying to cover the foul smell that surrounded him.

“Magister Manfred! I expected you.” He rubbed his hands together as a greedy smile broke out across his face. Its grainy hair fell across his forehead as sweat warmed the dust covering its skin. “Not so fast, though.”

With a charming, scary smile, he said, “I am more of a punctual person, Ezekiel.” He looked around, taking in the oak trees, the inky skies, the brown background, and the marbled cathedral. “This is where we are bringing our guest.”

“As per the directions Magister Abaddon gave me, Magister. He said the ritual will be here.”

“It’s stinks here,”

“Sorry for that. I’ll clean up the mess, Sire.”

“You should, you should.” Manfred nodded. “Abaddon is a reluctant fellow, don’t you think, Ezekiel?”

He rolled his eyes and his ears twitched with excitement. “Oh yes, Magister, he is. Quite a fellow, he is.”

Manfred frowned. Quite a fellow? More like frustrated and not trustable. But then, he wasn’t here to share his feelings with a lonely demon that had nothing to do except fill demon coffins. He walked to one of the coffins to find a demon with criss-crossed marks stitched upon its skin. Its eyes were closed and its hands were clasped across its chest.

“You are doing a good thing, Magister.”

“What?” His unresisting smile was a tad lopsided. “What did you say?” “Good thing, Magister.” The demon was a tad scared as he took a step back.

“That you are bringing our Creator, our god, forth. We are...v – very happy,” he stammered. “We all are. We are considering you as the Savior who is going to reclaim these old lands of ours.”

Manfred laughed. “You are shivering, Ezekiel. Why, pray tell?” His voice was sweet as if filled with honey and nectar.

“I am excited, Sire.”

“We all are. But we aren’t all shivering about it.” He laughed again.

His eyes twitched. “It’s nothing. It’s just your face...it’s . . .” He grew cold.

“My face?” He pointed his gloved fingers at his face. “You want to know how I got this, Ezekiel. How I came upon this kind of mask?”

“It’s a mask?” he inquired, trying to find assurance within Manfred’s gentle

tone.

“Oh, yes, it is. I don’t have a face. I have masks, many of them. It’s a funny story, a very funny story.” He caught Ezekiel’s face and clutched it hard. “Do you like funny stories, Ezekiel? Do you like them? Eh? Tell me. So you like them? Because I don’t.” His smile disappeared as he pushed Ezekiel down into the coffin beside the sleeping demon. “Am I crazy, Ezekiel?” He knelt close to the grave. “Am I crazy?”

“No, no, no. You aren’t, Magister.”

“You are just saying that to make me happy, aren’t you?” “Not, not happy. The truth, Magister,”

“Stop calling me Magister!” Manfred licked his lips feverishly. “You see, I am the best liar in the world. The best! And only one liar knows when another is lying.” He pushed himself to his feet and grabbed the shovel. Slowly, he started to toss the mud into the grave, bit by bit. “I wanted to ask you one thing, just one thing. When we kill demons, they turn to ash. So how do they end up being here?”

Ezekiel cried. Tears streamed down his cheeks. “TELL ME!” yelled Manfred.

“They die up there. They come here to be buried because they can’t go up

again.”

“Ohhhhhh! Wonderful.”

“Why are you doing this to me, Magister? Why are you trying to bury me?” Manfred laughed. “I was bored and wanted to have a bit of fun. Everyone

[illegible]

needs a bit break from their lifestyle, don´t you think?´´

“Yes,” the demon whimpered.

The grave was almost done, only a part of the demon’s head could be seen. “I am going to lie now, Ezekiel. I will not kill you for random fun.” He winked and then smashed the shovel against his head, the loud thud reverberating from the force of his actions.

Mi chael's Messenger

The room was well lit. Caspar sat close to the fire, his eyes glistening. His lips parted. Death had yet to appear. Hours had passed and there was still no sign of him. Too many souls to reap, perhaps. Or was he trying to ignore Caspar's summons? That's atrocious. Death would never. He was the first one to put Caspar in the position he now found himself in.

Capernaum had gone to the Order's meeting as a mole to see if he could find something useful about the ritual. It had been two hours now since he'd gone. Balthazar was busy watching television with a look of delight on his face, his eyes shining. He laughed and rolled over the couch, sometimes unintentionally tearing off the leather with his claws. He felt his stomach squeezing when he tried to resist a laugh.

Ivy was sitting at the dining table, whistling to herself and sometimes peeked from her corner at the shows Balthazar was watching. Every now and then, she'd gaze at Caspar's hard, stone face as he sat there thinking. She noticed how he kept a finger pressed against his lips when he was deep in thought. Perhaps it was his way of concentrating as such were the foibles of men.

"Caspar, you should watch this. Geez, it's so frigging funny!" Balthazar said and laughed, which made it hard for Caspar to even understand what he was saying.

Caspar's shrugged. "What's so funny about it?" "A fight between a dog and a baby,"

"That doesn't make sense, does it?" he asked. "Why on Earth, would a dog fight with a baby? It's preposterous."

Ivy rolled her eyes. Her expression clearly said, *'Don't be so uptight.'* "Yeah, I know. It's like the world's end, right?"

His eyes shot up with surprise. "Are you being sarcastic, lady?" "No. I am being nostalgic."

Caspar's brows furrowed. He didn't like being mocked by a girl. Yes, she was a Nephilim, but she was still a girl. He ignored her, as if she'd taken his favorite toy and was not giving him back.

A car with flashing headlights rolled toward the mansion. Startled, Caspar jumped up and went to the door. Ivy's expression changed. Balthazar didn't do much. He gazed back and waited for Caspar to say something. In the morning mist, he found a glimmering skeleton wearing a suit trying to run for the door. The bizarre image of the skeleton melted as the door opened and he found Capernaum, wet and muddied. Caspar had mistaken Capernaum for a skeleton. It was an honest mistake.

What he didn't notice was the ragged scratches and bruises upon his skin. His eyes were swollen and his face was half scarred. His coat was ripped and scratched as if by a jaguar or some other ferocious animal. It looked terrible. Something had gone wrong.

"They knew," Capernaum breathed. "They found out I was the spy inside the Order. Manfred caught me."

"How's that possible? How did they know?" "That I do not know."

Caspar had never seen Capernaum get angry. Though emotionless, he was tough. Yet he now sported an impassive face with bloodied eyes, anger shining within their depths.

“I don’t really wanna die, but I think Death has something to do with this,” Balthazar said.

“No, that’s impossible.”

“It makes sense. It makes perfect sense.” Ivy nodded. “He has not been coming, even though we’ve called him repeatedly. Where is he? On top of that, what is he doing?”

“He is Death, for God’s sake. Everyone knows what he’ll be doing.” Caspar didn’t want to believe otherwise, but soon things started to become clear.

“We have to go on that assumption, for now then.”

Capernaum refused to utter a single word. He was quiet. As his tone seemed bitter, Caspar remembered that Capernaum and Death had a history of lies and pain.

“There’s good news, though.”

Ivy’s jaw tightened. “And what exactly could that be, sir?”

Sir? Caspar knew she was Capernaum’s apprentice, learning the ways of a Nephilim, the runes, the tattoos, about the demons, about the rogue angels, as well as everything that pertained to Lucifer, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael – The Four Blood Brothers. Yet he didn’t expect a ‘sir’ from her when it came to Capernaum who was a cold-blooded demon.

“I found out where the ritual is. Where Manfred is going to practice the will of the four djinns.”

“Ohoo! Yuppie!” Balthazar cried, though his voice sounded bored. “It’s in the Land of Souls.”

“Isn’t that the . . .?” Caspar’s voice trailed off.

“Yes. That was where Michael and Lucifer fought. Where Michael was able to trap Lucifer in a cage known as Purgatory to be eternally condemned.” Capernaum

seemed as if he were disappointed about something. “He must have purposely chosen this place because it is close to Purgatory.”

“Can someone fill me in about this?” Balthazar inquired.

Caspar looked at him with reluctance. “Land of Souls is a place where Death has no control over the deaths of demons. That’s heaven for demons. Before it was where the bodies of the dead demons lay. It was a peaceful land, where only gifted souls were allowed to rest. At that time, during the Great Host, the biggest war between Hell and Heaven, Michael and Lucifer landed there. There, Michael created the perfect cage made out of his bones and trapped Lucifer within it. He named it Purgatory.”

“Why name it later? Why not before when he was making the cage? Wouldn’t it be better, as it would distract him while he would be yanking his bones out?” Balthazar’s look was puzzled.

Ivy smirked slightly. Few things just cracked her up. Caspar found no humor in the situation, however. He didn’t give a damn as to what Balthazar had said. He was busy in his own world.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand. We see the demon pulverizing here, so how come the corpses of the demons lay there?” Balthazar queried.

“If a demon dies here, we see ash, but the corpse is automatically transported to the Land of Souls,” Capernaum said.

“That makes sense,”

“We have to go now,” Caspar replied.

“The ritual is not until midnight. It’s the eclipse tonight.”

“So he could...Oh, Manfred, Manfred, Manfred!” He smiled with amusement and clapped his hands together as he stamped his feet. “Oh, you are brilliant! You are brilliant, Manfred Croft!”

Ivy raised her brows. Balthazar’s jaw opened. Why was he calling the public enemy number one, brilliant?

“Don’t you see it?” He looked at Ivy and then at Balthazar. “Your brains...they are so unused!” He grinned. “I can get good money out of your brains, if I sell them on the market.”

“Hey, don’t act like a jerk, all right!” Ivy snapped.

“If I recall correctly, I think I am very good at being one.”

“Do people actually buy unused brains? I don’t really think so.” Balthazar’s smile was a tad mocking.

Caspar took a deep breath.

“Tell us, or I’ll stab you,” Ivy warned.

“You won’t.” Caspar narrowed his eyes. “I know.” “Do you want to test your luck?”

“All right. The eclipse...He has chosen the day of this eclipse because when Lucifer rises, his lost power will be restored. Though the power gained won’t be as much as he had before, it will be enough to destroy many lives,” Caspar explained with exasperation. “Now the question is, what should we do about it?”

“We must strike!” Ivy suggested

“No, no, no, Ivy. There would be several hundreds, even thousands of demons, waiting for their Creator,” Capernaum replied. “It would count us as fools if we struck them with no suitable strategy on hand.”

Caspar stepped forward, suspicion clouding his features. A sharp glint lit the corners of his eyes. “Whenever you are talking about Lucifer, you are saying ‘their Creator’ as if you don’t consider yourself as one of the beings Lucifer has created.”

Capernaum didn’t answer. His face was cold as he stared back at Caspar. “What is going on? Why are you trying to help us and why are you trying to

conspire against the one who created you?” he asked angrily. The words slipped with such force and such magnitude that everything shook around them. “You don’t consider yourself a demon, do you?”

Capernaum refused to say a word.

“I am questioning this loyalty of yours to us. I think you are pulling us into a trap.” Caspar reached for his cane.

“Are you crazy, Caspar? This man has been with me for almost seven years and I am sure if he would have been untrustworthy, I would have known.”

“Good cheaters never leave clues.”

Capernaum swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Well, I am no cheater.” He wasn’t angry. “You have to trust me on this, Mr. Socrates. You have to. After this, I will tell you everything, but not now. We have lots of strategies to consider and lots of things we have to discuss so that we can try to abolish Manfred’s plan. We have to work together. I swear, I shall tell you when the time is right.”

“Do I have a choice?” Caspar lamented. He was not yet convinced of Capernaum’s loyalty. He walked about, his eyes sweeping the rest of the house. He whistled and said, “What is the plan, then?”

“We can’t win them over.” The wounded demon made his way to the sofa, his voice sounded frail and for the first time, he looked as old as his human appearance depicted. “Like this with just the four of us? We need support.”

“How will we able to get that?” Balthazar asked.

“I know. Yes.” Caspar grinned. “Who wanted Lucifer to be in Purgatory in the first place? Who put him there?”

“Are you thinking of channeling the Archangel Michael?” Ivy prodded, feeling a tad stunned.

“No. No. I am thinking of meeting him.” Caspar’s smile broadened. “That’s our last chance.”

“He’s right. Our last chance. Michael will do anything to stop Lucifer from

rising.”

Balthazar stepped forward and walked from the television room to the common room. His legs now looked way too small for his bulky body. It looked as if a turtle has been forced walk on two legs. He started floating as he realized that everyone was staring at him.

“I have known an angel. He might be able to connect us to Michael,” Capernaum replied.

“We wait then,” Caspar breathed.

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An awkward silence descended upon Ivy, Caspar, and Balthazar. Capernaum had gone to his room to rest. Ivy’s eyes were focused on Caspar with anger and irritation as if any second now, she was going to interrogate him. Balthazar was whistling in hopes of lightening the atmosphere.

Caspar trusted Death. For some reason, he couldn’t turn fathom the thought of Death being a traitor. It was difficult to accept it, but as per these circumstances, he

had to believe that it was a minor possibility. Capernaum had time enough to tell them the reason why he was helping them, but he was too weak to even speak. He'd told them how the others had learned of his betrayal and chased him, scratching and burning him, barely getting out alive.

Yet the main question Caspar mulled over was whether Michael would help them? It seemed legitimate that Michael wanted the same thing he wanted, but would he do something about it? There was no surety. He had second thoughts about the situation at hand because he knew angels were tricky entities. They were worse than demons. Demons wanted their kingdom on Earth, but angels – they were good. So good, that they would sacrifice millions of lives in order to exact their righteous justice.

Ivy's face was pale and round. The cuts upon her cheeks were sharp. Her nose was thin and perfect with perky lips beneath it. She had crossed her arms about her chest, her eyes wide as she glanced at Caspar once in a while.

"You are an asshole," she said abruptly. "I am aware of that."

"You are a bastard, a ruthless, stupid, idiot bastard." Caspar didn't retaliate. He nodded instead.

"Why aren't you abusing me?" "Because I am not an idiot."

Balthazar kept whistling and slowly the tone grew louder. She stood up. "So you are calling me an idiot?"

"Yes."

She pulled her dagger out. "Call me that once more!"

"Idiot," he replied and cut her off before she could complete the sentence.

“AHHHHH!” With her dagger clutched tightly between her fingers, she leapt at Caspar.

He dodged the blow and grabbed Ivy as he stepped behind her, one arm wrapping around her neck and the other curling around her belly. A unique sensation rippled through him, one he’d never felt before. Soft blotches of red formed upon his cheeks and he began to feel warm. His hold upon her weakened and took advantage of it. She turned and kicked him in the abdomen. He collapsed and she jumped on top of him, her dagger plummeting downward.

He grabbed a hold of her hands and said, “You really thinking of killing me?” “Of course not. I just want to hurt you.”

“That’s
stupid.”
“You are
stupid.”

“What on Heaven is happening here?” a husky voice inquired.

They turned to find a bald headed man wearing round specs and a suit standing before them. He was smiling, yet there was no grace in it.

“Hello,” he said. “I am Zephyr, Archangel Michael’s messenger.” He took note of their astounded expressions. “Am I disturbing something?” His tone was neither warm nor soothing. “Mind you, I don’t care.” He adjusted his specs and walked forward. “Someone came to me stating that a demon wanted to see me. It is confusing because demons never come to an angel for help. They know that death is waiting if they do.”

“This time it’s serious,” Ivy said.

“Ah.” He approached the table and picked up a glass. “You are a Nephilim? I see right through you.” He poured some wine in the glass. “Cheers,” he said and

sipped his drink. “I am the messenger as well as the principal of the Nephilim Academy. I am sure I have never seen you there.” His gaze was threatening.

Ivy wasn’t scared. She remained still as she tried to think of a reply. “Because I never wanted to go,”

“So where are you getting your training?” “Here.”

“May I ask, by whom are you being trained?” “Capernaum.”

“That degenerate!” Zephyr spat, his voice full of absolute anger. He calmed down as if it was nothing.

Caspar thought he was trying to scare them and was moderately successful. “A gifted child in the apprenticeship of a demon,” he mused. “That is absurd.”

He paused and licked his lips. “Do you have any idea what are you missing, child? We train half angels as our own offspring. We give them wisdom and power and a sense of brain to not acquaint themselves with the degenerates.” He emphasized the words. “We make Nephilims proud and powerful, not weak and stupid, like you are now.”

Caspar came forward. His mouth twitched slightly. “You are absolutely right. Perhaps I would have mistaken this as the same Academy where most of the Nephilims died in 1945 during World War II because of Nazi soldiers turned into demons. Not to mention their lack of education and combat skills.”

The angel’s jaw clenched. “That was 1945, kid.”

“Oh, right, right.” He sounded amused. “I think I am mistaken again by the late rumors of your Academy. When the students went on a mission to destroy a demon nest, your fellow Nephilim students burnt an entire building filled with

humans in which the nest was based. But then, that's perfectly not stupid and is absolutely wise, don't you think?"

"What are you trying to prove here?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Just stating the facts, is all." He stared at Zephyr's stony face. "Oh, oh. Oh, I see, you wanted an honest reply. Well, honestly speaking, your school sucks," he said with confidence, a nonchalant smile upon his face. "And what she is learning here is actually far better than what your Academy teaches."

He winked at Ivy, who gave him a befuddled look. She looked impressed. More so, than he gave her credit for.

Zephyr slammed the glass upon the table. "And you might be?"

"Caspar Socrates. I might shake your hand, but I don't want to get my hands dirty." He lifted his arms, wiggling his pale, bony fingers. "I get rashes when I have an angel's scent on me."

"Yikes," Balthazar muttered, his tone much too low for Zephyr to hear. "You like getting killed, don't you?" It sounded like a warning. Zephyr

stepped forward, his bald

head, glistening. "Actually, I

am famous for that."

Zephyr stepped back as he saw a silver line dance across Caspar's collarbone where a big mark had been seared onto his skin. It was shaped in the form of an ankh. He was heavily protected from angels.

"Why does my heart tell me to kill you, Mr. Socrates?" Zephyr asked coldly. "Don't know. Your heart might have an answer for that." Caspar grinned

broadly and flashed his bright, white teeth.

"He bugged you?" Capernaum asked as he appeared.

For some reason, he looked frailer. He wore a shirt and loose pajamas, his hair hanging lank about his head. The skin of his face was creased entirely. Zephyr turned to face the demon and they both shook hands.

“You got a quite a man, I suppose.”

“I am nineteen, so I am more like a boy,” Caspar corrected.

“Ignore him. I think you got my message, but I don’t see Michael anywhere,” Capernaum noted.

“He’s not coming,” Zephyr icily replied.

“I specified that this was an alert situation.”

“Since when did you start thinking that we would listen what a degenerate

says?”

“I know you hate me because I am a demon, Zephyr, but I have not changed. I am still with the angels in working and fighting for them.”

“We don’t need a pitiful, old demon’s help.”

“Listen . . .” Capernaum’s voice was weak. “You need to understand. We need to speak to Michael urgently. It is very, very important. I wouldn’t have called if it wasn’t necessary.”

Zephyr scratched his bald head. “If it’s so important, you have to tell me then. I am the messenger and the commander under Michael.”

“Why can’t you let us meet Michael?”

“He is weak and ill after the battle he had in the Land of Souls. Since then, I have been working on his behalf. The only thing I am not doing is pushing orders. Michael takes care of that. You tell me what has gone wrong and I’ll present it to him. Whatever his answer might be, I will be sure to tell you.”

“You have been promoted, I see?” Capernaum as a tad shocked.

“Because I followed the Will,” he said.

There was no doubt that there was some history between Capernaum and Zephyr. They had no wish to disclose any of it in front of Caspar, Ivy, and Balthazar. Yet they’d deduced that Capernaum had once been Zephyr’s friend.

Capernaum made Zephyr sit down and explained everything from Manfred Croft’s plan to Lucifer’s rising ritual at midnight. Zephyr didn’t say a word, respecting the conversation from one half only. Well, it was true. Angels do have a lot of patience.

“This is terrible.” Zephyr said. “I must talk to Michael now. But your team, or whatever this is, they have committed a horrible mistake. They should have come to us first for help.”

“There are spies amongst the angels. We didn’t want to alert him because of this so we thought of taking matters into our own hands before anything turned messy,” Ivy replied.

“Which you were unsuccessful in doing,” Zephyr snapped.

Ivy looked away in embarrassment, unable to meet his deep, dark stare. Without bidding them a farewell, he walked out of the room as a rising teleportation glow rose and then vanished. Zephyr had gone.

“We might have some allies,” Capernaum breathed, his voice a tad low. The joyous tone within it was unmistakable. “We might be able to defeat Manfred, for all we know.” Hope in his tinged his smile.

“I didn’t see his wings! Angels should have wings!” Balthazar said. His mouth opened wide to reveal his fangs.

Re union

Death was standing within a large pavilion decorated with granite flooring and mammoth columns made out of marble. A beautiful skylight stretched across the glass ceiling. The stars and shadows above could be seen clearly. Statues of mermaids, cupids, as well as that of different creatures were scattered about occupying every corner and free space available. From where he stood, there was a long, linen carpet with yellow border that spread toward a flight of stairs. The room ended at a big bronze door, which was now closed.

He was dressed in an overcoat with moons and stars across the fabric, torn dark pants, and long slippers. He also wore a green gem around his neck as if it were a pendant. His hair was spiked and his green eyes were troubled. The kohl in his eyes deepened as the bronze doors opened, revealing a large creature as it entered the room.

The being wore a long robe that flowed to the floor in red silk. A fire blazed and hovered above his bald head. It became a dark, fiery red as its eyes landed upon Death. A hungry smile broke out across his face and his red eyes ignited.

“What a surprise!” War replied as he drew close to Death, whose face was placid. “How are you doing, brother?” He embraced him, but Death refused to return the motion. He was frozen with a burning look upon his face. “You look good. I see, you fancy your human skin.” He paused. Death’s stone cold face didn’t waver, nor did he smile. “Why are you here?”

“Don’t try to show me you don’t know why I am here,” Death quipped and pushed the red cloaked figure aside. “I am not a fool.”

“I never thought you were.” War smiled.

“War,” Death began, “this is it. Tell me now.”

War’s smile remained upon his face. He patted Death’s back and said, “Pestilence and Famine are there as well. We are having a sort of feast. We’ll talk about this there.”

Death moved ahead, briskly, toward the bronze doors. “What are they doing in your realm?”

“We are having a get-together.”

“And you didn’t think of calling me?” he asked, his voice was slightly taunting.

“You have indulged in the mortal affairs. I rather thought you would not wish to come.”

“Well, then, you have thought wrong,” Death replied.

Death found himself within a big hall where soldiers with silver-plated armors clutched their spears tightly against their chest. They all wore gauntlets, knee pads, and a helmet in the shape of a big long horn, shimmering in the room filled with gold and bronze artifacts.

A round table sat in the middle of the room surrounded by the soldiers. Two figures, one in a yellow robe and the other in a black cloak were sitting adjacent to each other, murmuring softly. They looked like one of the members from Senate, but from above, their faces were blurry. One had a round yellow flame around his head, while the other had a black flame hovering above it. Looking closely, the black one was a woman with an aristocratic look. Her face was visible through the smokeless black fire.

“Look!” War cried. “Someone is here to meet us.”

They turned around to face him. A bleak intensity filled the woman's face. The man gave them a gentle smile.

"Death," the woman whispered.

"Famine," Death breathed. "And Pestilence."

Anyone would notice Pestilence, for when he grabbed an apple, it immediately started to turn rotten with a nasty odor hovering about and flies and moths appearing out of nowhere.

"What are you doing here?"

Famine looked afraid. It was almost as if she detested Death's arrival, for he had not been issued an invitation to the soirée. Pestilence shushed Famine with a sneaky pat on her legs. Death saw it, but didn't say a word.

"It's been a long time. Sit down," Pestilence said, his voice husky.

Death needed no further invitation. He sat down, his bare chest visible. The various patterns of runes and symbols were snaking across his skin. His face was clear and pale, his eyes trained upon Famine who was now shivering. Her flame wavered when she saw Death. He had known that Famine was always weak in keeping things confidential. She would give up the feeling.

"Why are you wearing your human skin?" Pestilence asked.

"I prefer it," Death replied. "Besides, this is not your real form as well." "But this is close to our true form,"

"Close? That's just an excuse." He pulled his chair back noisily, breaking the uncomfortable silence that descended upon them. He poured wine into a small jeweled goblet and hastily drank it. "Ah, splendid, as always,"

Famine picked up her goblet and Death's eyes narrowed. Her hands trembled as she brought it to her lips and took a small sip. She set the cup down carefully. War,

with his wide, animalistic smile, kept looking at Death as if he was some circus performer while Pestilence ate the rotten apple.

"Famine, I want to ask you . . ." Death's gaze was slightly wicked. "How are things going on Earth?"

"F – Fine," she stammered and looked down at her golden plate. She was really bad at lying and Death knew he could use that to his advantage.

Pestilence snapped. "She is not well, brother."

"Oh, really?" Death raised his thin, pierced brows. He poured himself more of the wine. "I thought she was hiding something from me, brothers." He looked over at Pestilence and War. "So I should come to terms of why I am here. I detest you three so badly that if I can, I am willing to reap you all right now. I have no interest to come and see you, but circumstances have led me here."

"Harsh words always give out unexpected reactions." Pestilence choked back a laugh.

"There's nothing funny about it, Pestilence," Death grated. "We had a secret which was forbidden to speak of, which should have not been divulged into the hands of another. No one should have known of it. No one!"

He sipped his drink. "That forbidden secret was...um...Well, how shall I say this gingerly? It was devastating. We took an oath." His green eyes swung in their direction. "An oath to not reveal that forbidden matter. An oath defines that it is sacred and kept confidential from anyone outside the conversation. That oath was recently broken several days ago. Is that what an oath defines? Eh? Tell me!"

He banged his clenched fist upon the table. His goblet tipped over and the scarlet poured out of it. It moved slowly, like a thread twisting across the tablecloth.

War’s his steady smile was plastered upon his face. “What are you talking about, brother? We have no idea what you are saying.”

“Oh, right, right. Only the four of us knew about the forbidden way of raising Lucifer once more. I didn’t say anything to Manfred Croft. So it must have been one of you.”

“Who is Manfred Croft? What a bizarre name?” Pestilence scoffed. “What are you talking about? Are you in control of your senses?”

“I am not. No. No, I am not. But I think Famine . . .” He turned to face the sharp nosed woman. “She knows what I am talking about.”

War’s smile disappeared. Pestilence coughed in nervousness. They both stared at Famine, who kept rolling her carved ring around her finger.

“It – it was his plan!” she stammered and pointed at War.

“Go on, go on, sister. It would be fine to tell me.” His smile was small and forced. “It would be perfectly all right. You can tell me. I am your big brother and the oldest of all, so you need not worry about my kid brothers.”

“War thought of joining forces with him. With Manfred Croft by giving him the information he sought. Pestilence agreed and I...I agreed, as well.” Beneath the onslaught of her discomfort, her black flame glowed bright. “I thought it would be...It would be fine. That we would achieve our goal.”

Death was confused. “What is this goal?” His voice echoed throughout the hall as well as within Pestilence and War’s thin ears.

“Come on, old brother! You know. When God created Earth, he didn’t want greed, power, death, and all that evil. We saw Him, how he created Earth, how he managed to create Adam and Eve with His hands. He loved Earth. The thought vanished when Earth turned into a total disaster. Project Earth was a failure, a

complete failure. It was a disappointment for me and fortunately for Pestilence, as well. Famine thinks the same way, too."

"So you thought that by raising Lucifer you would change Earth? He will make hell here!" His jaw line tightened.

"We are not stupid here, brother. We know what the consequences are once Lucifer rises. We all know that. We just don't want anything to do with the messy part. When he'll rise, he'll destroy mankind and then we'll destroy him. We will make Earth a much better place than what it is now. That is the plan, no matter what, no matter who interrupts," Pestilence said as a matter-of-factly.

"You are greedy, sinful, and insane. You think you'll be able to make Earth a better place? Hah! That is the worst goal I have seen in millennia. If God doesn't want to change Earth, we shouldn't give a damn about it, either."

"God is not paying attention to Earth. He is busy. But us – we see the things that matter the most every day and we have taken a pledge, to bring Lucifer back. After he kills everyone, we will kill him as well."

Death laughed, refusing to put stock into the words that were coming out of War's mouth. He was disappointed. He'd taken care of War for as long as he could remember, despite his rebelliousness and insane manners. But now, seeing him become a monster, Death could only feel pity for him.

"I was the evil one. I was always considered the evil one," Death began. "Because I was Death and I was responsible for people's deaths. But now...now, I think I was far better than you smuts. I never expected the three of you to become what I've dreaded for ages. You are cold blooded monsters now!"

"We are doing good in our own way."

"By assisting a person in wiping out the human civilization?"

“Every war has casualties, brother!” Pestilence shouted. “Out of chaos comes

order.”

“I am seeing chaos coming from order, here and now.” He pointed directly at his two brothers and his sister.

He threw his chair away in anger and lowered his head as tears poured down his cheeks. He felt betrayed. He walked to the end of the room and looked behind him. The three Horsemen were sitting at the table, looking back at him with anger flaming within their eyes.

“I am Death. Everyone has to die. One day, someday, it doesn’t matter because anyone can be killed. When your time comes, I shall come to reap you,” he promised and closed the bronze doors behind him. “Oh, I shall surely come to reap you!”

La nd of Souls

Caspar was in his room, packing his satchel with the finest knives and daggers he'd found in the basement of Capernaum's mansion. Capernaum had a warehouse of weapons underneath his house. He held his cane up high and saw Balthazar as he sat close to the opened window. Rain blanketed the entire view. A long, leather belt was tied diagonally around his chest where a knife and two other blades were fastened.

Balthazar frowned. "These weapons make me heavy."

Caspar stared at him with soft contemplation and shook his head. He dropped the smoke bombs into the leather bag. The sound of slight movement within the other room caught his attention. He approached it and flung the door open to find Zephyr drinking scotch and talking to Capernaum. The angel's face was not alarmed or cold this time. Instead, it was serious and dedicated. He and Capernaum whispered amongst themselves.

As Ivy strode out of the healing room, Caspar saw her in full battle gear for the first time. She was wearing a bronze-plated armor upon her chest with sharp, bladed gauntlets strapped to her hands. A long sword hung on her back and another sword was clipped to her belt. She held a wooden, leather stringed bow with a quiver of arrows over her right shoulder.

Balthazar looked at his gear and then at hers. It was of vast difference. He sighed softly and shook his head. Caspar was surprised. She was prepared for battle. Her eyes were swollen and the deep scars she'd gotten in the fight with the demon showed upon her face.

"In front of me, you guys look naked," Ivy chortled.

Caspar pretended that he hadn't heard what she'd said. He turned to find that Zephyr was now gone. Capernaum stood nearby, his smile broad.

"The angels are coming to the Land of Souls. Michael has ordered the attack." "That is brilliant." Ivy beamed.

Caspar smiled. "Very good. I'm going to borrow Balthazar and Ivy for some

time."

He pulled Ivy aside, leaving a confused Capernaum within the previous room. He closed the door behind him and turned to face Ivy with a peculiar expression on his face. Balthazar's eyes shot up in question. Caspar's smile faded. He paced from left to right, trying to find the right words to begin with.

His British accent thickened, making his baritone voice sound a tad gravelly: "We have a different plan," he said. "While the angels and Capernaum are trying to fight the demons that have come to the uprising, we have to do something else."

"What do we have to do?"

"We will attack Manfred. He's clever. He must have some guards around him. It will take days for the angels to reach the place where Manfred will be practicing. That's the reason we have to go straight to Manfred."

Ivy and Balthazar looked at one another. Balthazar

nodded. "The plan seems nice and logical as well,"

Balthazar replied.

"Manfred will win whether the angels attack or not. But us? He doesn't expect us. We will hit him by surprise," Caspar mused.

Ivy pondered his plan. Caspar knew she'd learnt that every Nephilim, be they brother, friend, or sister she'd met or had been acquainted with would be coming to the war. They'd be fighting with her. Even the one she had a crush on, Ryun, would

be there. Abandoning her Nephilim group was something she was reluctant to speak about.

“I don’t know. I am not sure.” Ivy lowered her head. “I...I made promises. Many are expecting me there.”

“Our main objective is not to fight amongst friends. It’s to prevent Manfred from raising Lucifer,” Caspar stated in a subtle, persuasive tone.

“I can’t abandon them. Thank you for the offer.”

Ivy shook her head. She looked ashamed. She didn’t even tilt her head up to look at Balthazar or Caspar. Without another word, she left the room.

“I wonder what’s stopping her from joining us,” Balthazar commented. “Your bad breath,” Caspar replied. “I presume.”

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Caspar had only heard and read about the Land of Souls. He had never seen the place itself. His first reaction was the fact that it seemed to be a bizarre place. He left Capernaum, Ivy and Zephyr behind and entered the portal before they did. He’d gotten the location from Capernaum by lying to everyone that he and Balthazar would be waiting at the doors.

The Land of Souls should have been called the Land of Blood. Everything, from the sky to the land was red with sharp patches of grass. A cathedral stood in the distance with a humongous army of demons crowded in front of it. There was no order there and various types of hideous creatures were assembled in what was a disorderly mob. Some had wings, while some did not. Some had one head, while

some had two. It was an unforgettable view for Caspar as well as Balthazar, whose smoky eyes sparkled with wonder.

They crouched low and sprinted on occasion. Demons whistled, gurgled, and gnarled. There were numerous sounds rising up around them from every direction. If they were to be spotted, they would be lynched and mashed like boiled potatoes.

Caspar didn't want this to happen. He carefully moved toward the back of the cathedral and hid behind a gravestone with Balthazar. Two demons were guarding the backdoor with spears held tight within their hands. Above each, an orb was suspended.

"We are waiting for Zephyr's army, right?" Balthazar asked. Caspar sensed his fear. "Not exactly," he said. "Follow my lead." "Why do I always have to follow you? It's irritating!"

Caspar got up. The demons saw him and immediately aimed their orbed spears at them. He lifted his hands in surrender, one hand clutching the cane. His satchel hung loosely about his shoulder. The demons stepped forward, their shiny tattoos sparkling. Their heads were shaved and black tattoos covered their muscular bodies. They frowned as Caspar stood before them.

"Identify," one of them requested

"Caspar Socrates and Balthazar." He waved at the gargoyle. The demons exchanged looks.

"What is this about, Caspar?" the gargoyle inquired. "Is this your plan? Please, please, please, don't say this is it."

"No, of course not."
"Thank God."

"We are going to be prisoners,"

“WHAT!” Balthazar was shaken.

Caspar gave him a nauseated look. “Oh, come on, nitwit. This is the only way to enter the ritual palace.”

“I don’t care. I am just waiting for Zephyr’s army to come, mate. I don’t want to be a grilled gargoyle for Manfred Croft.”

“Grilled Gargoyle?”

“Believe me, they are tasty.”

One of the demons hissed. “Come with us.”

The other grabbed Caspar and Balthazar by their arms. “You don’t have to be rude, do you?” Balthazar whined.

Pushing them forward, the demon opened the door. It led to a dark alley with stale and sour smell to it. Rodents and insects roamed around. The smell could have easily made anyone puke. Caspar was pushed into a disturbed world he’d never thought he would be part of. He knew this would only be a one-time thing. He wouldn’t regret his decision. It was part of his life, part of what he was now, part of what he would be a part of. What had happened to him, to his family, to his dog – it had all amounted to this.

The alley ended and a large stage stood before them. There was a row of seats, broken down and shattered as if someone had purposely destroyed it. Opposite the rows, a round, small pentacle surged in brightness. Manfred stood nearby as scary as ever with his maniacal smile and wide, dark eyes. He looked up. His smile didn’t fade when he saw Caspar. It broadened, instead.

“So, so, so. Like a fool, you come? Alone?” “I am here,” Balthazar replied.

“Oh! You brought your pet!” Manfred gave Balthazar a fleeting glance.

The two demons stood behind Caspar, while two others stood at the ready behind Manfred. Caspar couldn't attack him. It was impossible. He would be caught and clawed to death if he were to try to leap at him in retaliation.

"I am going to raise the Morningstar, Caspar, my dear," Manfred replied. "You can't do anything about that. But after that, I am sure, we will go for a coffee and you can tell me everything about me, about what you hate. I swear, I'll try to change, Sweetheart, just for you, I say." He laughed mockingly.

"Why are you doing this?" Balthazar asked. His voice was simple, yet furious. "Oh, oh. Caspar knows that answer." He grabbed Caspar's curly hair and

turned him about so that he was facing the gargoyle. "Tell him, Caspar. Why am I doing this?" He paused. Caspar didn't utter a word. "That's nasty. Nasty, nasty, nasty. Tell your pet the reason I am doing this. Ah well, I'll tell you, whatever your name is. I like danger."

"That's all? Don't you care as to what will happen to billions of people?" "Not really. No." He let go of Caspar's hair and walked away. "Look at you.

Such an ignorant little rock bastard you are, eh? You shouldn't worry. Your owner here, this rascal, has many secrets which will entertain you until I complete my objective."

Balthazar stared at Caspar with confusion. He refused to meet the gargoyle's inquisitive gaze. For the first time in his life, he felt like a coward. Manfred walked over to the pentacle and knelt down. He placed a feather on one of the stars as well as a tilted bone, a small circular compass, old and brutally tormented, and lastly, blood. He then set down a round talisman with a rune in the shape of a question mark in center of the pentagram. With chalk, he joined lines and symbols until it started to shine brightly. The feather had the essence of a Kuffle. The tilted bone had that of a

Forlock. The small circular compass belonged to an Ifrit. The blood had come from

the Marid.

As the ritual began, the cries commenced.

Sm iling Blood

The caterwauling was immense as demons gathered in front of the mansion. There were snarls, yips, and whining amongst them. Heads swiveled toward the entrance. Long wings and hands holding swords and daggers were seen through the window. The angels had come. Caspar smiled and Balthazar grinned. Manfred's smirk didn't waver, but it shimmered with intensity and desperation.

"Nice move, Socrates, but your friends are going to be late." "Not so late!" a voice cried.

Ivy appeared with her double-edged blade and sprinted toward the demons. With one shove, her sword plunged into demon flesh. Pure dark smoke erupted as the demon disintegrated. With another flick of her arm, she swung the hilt of her blade and sliced another demon's head off. Snarls and bellows came forth from the ash demons.

Caspar plunged the S part of his cane into a demon. He kicked it away and watched as it flopped around the room before it came to rest in a corner. Balthazar threw multiple knives at the demon as he fell back and dissolved in ash and smoke. As they turned toward Manfred, they found that he'd finished the ritual.

Caspar shoved his cane against his wispy skin that caused him to fall to the ground. Manfred laughed heartily, pleased with himself. He picked him up by the collar, his dusty coat flapping behind him.

"How will I be able to reverse the ritual?"

"There is no way to reverse it, Caspar. You lost, again," Manfred said, his teeth chattering as he chortled. "Did you ever figure out how I knew Capernaum was

a traitor? Ugh . . .” Blue spinning cords wrapped around his neck. “Didn’t you wonder how I knew about everything? Think about it.”

Caspar narrowed his eyes. His hold upon Manfred’s neck never wavered as his mind wandered. When he couldn’t find any suitable explanation, he tightened his fingers and cut off a part of his air flow. “You must have concocted a dirty plan of yours.”

> “Wrong,” Manfred replied. “It was because I was able to get into your mind,” His body grew numb with surprise. For a moment, he thought he was

mistaken. That perhaps he’d heard what Manfred said was wrong. He pulled his hands off of Manfred’s neck.

Manfred’s face was red and blotchy as he coughed loudly. “Yes . . .” he hacked. “It is indeed shocking, eh? Hahaha.” He burst into laughter once more. “You might be wondering how can a cranky fellow like me is able to get in your mind. Well it’s simple, really. You just get in, sometimes. Not every time, mind you, but if you concentrate, well . . .”

He massaged his throat to bring the swelling down. “Once you know about a person’s subconscious, you are able to get inside his mind. I was able to do that. Just for...um...well, for five seconds, I guess. And those five seconds...Oh, Godddd! They were brilliant!”

Ivy and Balthazar were rooted in place as a profound wave of shock coursed through their bodies. Caspar’s face was alight with astonishment. Indirectly, he was the one who fed Manfred the information about Capernaum’s betrayal. All this time, he didn’t trust Capernaum, yet what he shouldn’t have trusted was himself.

“Those five seconds...They showed me . . .” He pushed his blunt fingers against Caspar’s chest. “About your little demon friend and the fact that he’s going up

against us, his own stupid race. It was just so bad, so stupid, and so funny. It's a shame, really." He chuckled. "You gave me valuable information. Getting into your mind means knowing the tiny secrets you have. One of them slid past the wall you'd erected and I caught it. Now...now . . ." He stared at the pentacle. "You have lost. Again. It's fun doing that, making you crazy. To portray you as a lunatic. Anyone can be crazy, Caspar Socrates. Anyone can be, if they have one bad day."

The pentacle shone. Bright light glinted across the glass windows and blinded Caspar momentarily. Balthazar swept his hand over his eyes. Ivy covered her own in order to avoid the sudden glare.

Manfred's eye glimmered. "It's the beginning of the end."

Caspar stepped forward and punched him in the face. Black goo spurted out of his nose.

Manfred smiled through broken teeth. "It's history, Caspar. History is repeating itself. I won, you lost. It's that simple. Our story – it's just repeating. It's coming to end and going back to the beginning. Our story hasn't changed."

"No. No. It's not repeating. It's ending. In this story, you die." Caspar twisted the S. The cane turned into a shotel. In one smooth motion, he plunged the blade into Manfred's chest. "It's a gift from Death."

Black liquid poured from Manfred's mouth. He smiled and fell back onto the floor. His arms and legs were splayed in different directions. His sadistic smile was slightly frightening. As pupils faded, his smile remained in place. Caspar stared down at the corpse. Its deathly posture was quite unsettling.

"He's dead," Balthazar quietly said. "That's good thing. Chaos is dead."

Caspar’s hand quivered as he let go of the shotel and swiped it through his curly hair. Shock rippled through him. “No, no, no,” he murmured as he stepped back. Without warming, he dropped to the floor. His eyes grew pale.

“What happened?” Ivy asked as she knelt beside him and touched his cold, colorless cheeks. “What’s wrong? You killed Manfred. Now we have to . . .”

“No.” Caspar refused to meet Ivy’s inquisitive gaze. He stared at the smiling and unmoving corpse instead. “NO!” he yelled.

Ivy grew scared. “What is going on? Manfred is dead, Caspar. Why are you so shocked about it?”

Caspar looked up at Balthazar and Ivy. His unfamiliar scrutiny was unsettling. His lips had gone white and his bronze eyes boiled with despair.

“Because...He can never...die!” he breathed.

“But you said you were killing him!” Balthazar gasped, horrified. “I didn’t mean literally. I thought of bruising him, but he...he died.” “Why it is so shocking for you?”

“Evil can’t die. That is the point. Evil can never die.” Caspar pulled himself to his feet and dusted off his disheveled coat. He approached the corpse and examined it once more. “He’s actually dead.”

The ground started shaking. Cracks and fissures started to split the earth. Tripping and falling, Caspar did his best to regain his footing. He grabbed his satchel and his shotel and ordered the others to get out.

“Lucifer is rising.”

The trio pushed through the doors to find a battle taking place between the angels and demons. While the angels fought with their wings, spears, and blades, the demons utilized their bows and arrows to fight back. Long serpentine creatures

zigzagged through the crowd, trying to gnaw and chew at the Nephilims geared with heavy armor, swords, and daggers. A reddish tinge deepened the pink skies. A big purple cloud lit up the horizon like poison in the sky. Demons looked up and stopped fighting. Angels and Nephilims shivered with surprise.

"It's the end," Ivy said in horror. "We couldn't stop the end!"

Caspar tore down the field and plunged his blade into as many demons as possible, leaving them dumbfounded in the wake of such destruction. Balthazar was stunned and remained rooted in place. Tears streamed down Ivy's cheeks as she moved forward and started slashing at the rubbery skinned, tattooed demons. Gems and orbs flew by as beams of light inched across the field.

Madness ensued. The battle had resumed. Demons were now more powerful. They jumped on the Nephilims backs and tore off their heads. Serpents dodged the blades and daggers, tearing at the angel's bodies. Poisoned arrows stung the angel's white, shiny feathers and their faces started to rot. Yet as quickly as it had begun, the cacophony started to ebb. The battle was coming to an end.

Ivy found an injured Ryun and they hugged. Ryun seemed brutally wounded, strings of arrows lining his battle gear. His face was caked with dirt and several small cuts scored his skin. Never once did his smile disappear.

"Where were you?" he asked. "I tried to stop Manfred." "And?"

"He died."

"That's good."

“No!” A demon tore in her direction with agile swiftness. She lowered her back and thrust her blade into its belly before tossing the body aside. “The ritual has been completed.”

Ryun’s smile evaporated. The ground shook harder. Caspar was lost. Two demons appeared behind him. It was difficult. He was a mortal. He was known to use several useful tactics in battle. Face to face dueling was easy for him. This...this was too much for him. He was useless. The demon talons were stronger than an elephant’s paw. Nevertheless, he gave things his all. He shoved the shotel down one of the demon’s throats.

Another demon came at him, but his trajectory was intercepted. Balthazar clutched the field between his hands. Mud flew and the atmosphere turned grayish. Caspar felt suffocated, though he somehow managed to smile.

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“I think we have lost,” Ryun replied as he drew Ivy’s attention. “We can’t lose,” she said, refusing to believe the worst.

“We have. I am going to die.” He drew her attention to the large gash across his chest. “I am feeling weak.”

“No, no!” She pulled him within her arms, her black eyes staring deeply into

his.

“I just...Uhhh!” He clutched the wound. “I just want to say I’ve liked you. From the first moment I saw you, though I was afraid to tell you. But now this . . .” A bruise started to form around the fleshy gouge. “I don’t care. I just wanted to say this.”

Tears poured down her face, her lips quivering as she tried to support Ryun against her. Gently, she laced her fingers through his blond hair. “Isn’t it too late to say this?”

“I am dying, Ivy. I don’t want to die without telling you what I’ve always wanted to say. I would regret this. Not here, but in death.”

“You are an idiot,” she said as she gave him a watery smile.

His smile was sad and weak. His face was pale. The intensity within his blue sparkling eyes produced an emotion within her that she couldn’t control. “I am sorry.” He coughed up blood. “Promise me one thing, Ivy.”

“You are not dying!”

“No, no.” He curled her cheeks within the palms of his hands and held on tight. He needed her to listen closely to what he was going to say. “Promise me...Swear to me...That you will find a way to defeat Lucifer. Find a way to defeat the God-damned bastard!”

“I . . .” The words melted within her throat. She was unsure of what to say. Her friend – her crush, was dying in her arms.

“Promise me!” he yelled and coughed once more. “All right!” she conceded. “I – I will.”

“Good!”

Ivy bent down to press her mouth against his lips and kissed him thoroughly. He kissed her back, his hands sliding into her red streaked hair. Slowly, his hands loosened their grip and dropped to the ground. She felt as if she was kissing a block of ice. She pulled herself back, startled to find him lying there with his eyes closed and lips parted. No breath slid past his lips. He was dead.

“You can’t,” she whispered. “You can’t!”

An ice cold hand grabbed her from behind. Her face was completely wet with tears. ‘It’s all right. It’s all right,’ someone was saying. The words came at her as if from a distance. All sensation had somehow dimmed.

“Look at me,” someone demanded. She turned to find cat-like green eyes staring back at her. “You have to get out.”

“Where were you, Death?” she asked as she jumped to her feet with Death’s support. She glanced around to find angels, demons, Nephilims, and ultra-demons fighting. “Where the hell were you?”

“It was my siblings. They...they were the ones who gave forth the information about the ritual. I went to meet them.”

“We needed your help here.”

“I can’t do anything, Ivy.” Death’s face was pale. His glossy black hair contrasted sharply to it. “I can’t do it. I just reap and count souls. I don’t kill anyone. But you can. You can and you will. You go now and find Caspar and Balthazar and get out. Lucifer is coming from Purgatory. He’s not far. I’ll go and try to delay him, but you go now. Just go!”

Ivy regarded him for several minutes. She wouldn’t hesitate to go against his will. With one last hard look at Ryun’s corpse as it lay on the rugged ground, she made bolted.

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Caspar and Balthazar stood side by side, back to back, defending themselves. In a battle, it is not about brains, but rather muscles. Caspar’s mortal strength wasn’t capable of fighting so many demons at once. There were far too many. His body

ached and his heart pounded. He could hear the snarls and gnarls of the demons clustered around them. Their rubber-like skins tried to crack his head open to eat his brains. All he could do was use his shotel to defend himself.

Capernaum was nowhere to be seen. Where was he? Was he fighting angels or was he fighting demons? He was a demon, but he was on the side of the angels. And the angels? They flew like flocks of pigeons against a big creature with a serpent head and poisonous fangs jutting out of its mouth as it flicked its slimy tongue. Some had their wings chopped and fell down with burnt arrows pierced into their sides. Nephilims, easily recognizable because of their battle gear and lustrous eyes, were quick and defensive, but at the same time, they weaker than most of the demons.

He could see everything. Even the long blotted field of graves. They were infinite, stretching toward the horizon and meeting at the centre of this land. The Land of Souls was the apotheosis of all cemeteries. Graves dotted the burnt patchy grass growing like a wildfire. The oak trees stood with their branches and twigs crooked and broken as if they didn't want this war, as if they wanted peace and harmony.

As he surveyed his surroundings, he caught sight of a girl. She wasn't looking at him, the only human on the battlefield. She walked as if it was her family lawn, as if she were trying to find her mommy. She was small, almost five-years-old, wearing a scarlet-colored coat that was too heavy and too big for her. She held the collars up to sustain its weight. For a child, she had an innocent face with blue eyes and black hair. Her skin was fair like a finely whipped cream. The red coat was spattered with mud as she walked.

Why was the girl in middle of a field? What was she doing? Was it a figment of his imagination? Was the girl even real? Or was she a part of his subconscious, one he was not familiar with? What was she trying to do?

The questions came easily, full of normal, indifferent words with no subtle meaning. Yet the answers to those questions were the crux of trouble.

There was something was different about the girl. Something he could not explain. She seemed normal as she walked quietly in the midst of battle, but her demeanor was inexplicable. As she knelt beside a blossoming dark blue plant, something clicked in Caspar's mind.

Dread was written clearly upon her face. No smile. No laugh. Just a sour expression of unhappiness and misery. She touched the plant and it slowly died, shriveling back into the ground as if it didn't like the touch of her small hands. She stared at it with sadness, waiting for it to spring back to life. She wanted to apologize, to touch and form a truce with it. Most of all, she didn't want war or battle. She didn't want anything but a truce and peace.

The girl intrigued Caspar, by trying to find the meaning of his illusion. Yet he began to wonder if it was an actual illusion. He wasn't sure if what he was saw was real. Whatever it was, he knew could find a little meaning in what he'd just witnessed. There was a bit of truth behind the girl and her tenderness with the plant itself.

He spasmed and slid out of the hallucination. Understanding rippled down his spine as ribbons of blood slowly trickled down his cheek. His knee hit the ground, sliding across the mud. His eyes opened wide. The girl was not there. Nor was the plant. Instead, the scene before him was one of battle and darkness.

Soft whispers spoke into his ears. Like hymns, they started to sing; slow, deep voices that were almost threatening. He could hear the hard beating of his heart. It felt as if it were trying to explode from within his chest, to rip out the skin and escape from all this torment. His fingers grew numb, as if all the blood had drained out of them.

His face smashed into the ground, a pool of red blood seeping out of his head. His hands fisted the mud with uncertainty. His eyes opened and closed, the image before him gradually blurring. His vision became hazy and small dots formed in front of him. Despite all that, there was one thing that made him exceptional.

Caspar was smiling as he lay within his bed.

Af termath

“Hello, my friends. I am Longhorn Darcy and I am the new Chairman of Matrix Corporation,” the man in the black suit said.

He wore a long pin-striped suit with white shirt covered with small colored dots on it and a velvety tie wrapped around his neck. His boots shone in the green light.

“I bought this Corporation from its previous owner, Mr. Mann. Nice fellow. Mr. Mann was old and didn’t want his company to be run by his incompetent heirs, so he sold it to me.” He smiled. It was bright and clear. A sheer sense of delight coursed through his every word as he replied, “I know you will be uncomfortable working for me. You have been accustomed to Mr. Mann’s mannerisms. I understand that. But don’t worry. I want you to know that I am an understanding boss.”

He laughed. Hundreds of eyes were centered on him. “I am not your boss. Please, when you meet me, call me Longhorn. I don’t want any formality.” He walked to the left of the stage. “What I do want is success.”

He upheld his fist. “Success is something you don’t get. It isn’t a gift wrapped in paper. Success is what you achieve with passion and hard work. I want that. If you give me that, you will be a Matrix employee, but if you won’t...Please, listen to me. If you won’t...” He pointed a finger at his employees who watched him with shock and amusement. “You will be forgotten. I mean it!” he proclaimed. “I want success, now. Starting from today. If there any queries, please meet me in my office.” He paused and slid his hand into his pant pocket. “Questions?”

No one said a word. Silence reigned within the room. Many raised their brows and pursed their lips as they tried to find questions suitable for the current situation.

Yet they found none. Instead, they shook off their insecurities and let them go. Until someone within the crowd shouted for attention in the most inappropriate way possible.

"Yeah, I got one," the man said. "Are you even qualified to be the chairman?" Head swiveled around to face a fat man with a coffee mug within his hand. He

was smiling for no reason whatsoever. He had a blunt attitude and a twitchy eye. "I would answer that question in my office, Mr.?"

"Hopkins. Jack Hopkins."

"Mr. Hopkins, please meet me in five minutes. Any other questions? If there are any, I'll gladly answer."

When none came, he disappeared off of the stage.

***

Longhorn opened the door of his office to find another man inside. He was immaculately dressed with a crisp jet black haircut that was slanted at the back. His face was angular and straight and his brown eyes were curious. He smiled at him as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

"I am happy to see you."

"You too, brother," Longhorn shook his hand. "I feel so refreshed." He stared at his hands as if it were the first time he'd felt them. "These pathetic parasites are so different than what I expected." He touched his smooth skin. "Look at this. It's so soft, like paper or grass. I don't know how to express my emotions in this." He laughed. He went made his way to his chair and made himself comfortable. "Where is Mammon?"

“He’s out, as usual, trying to find women.”

“Mortal woman...I wonder what they’re like,” Longhorn laughed cheerfully. “Leviathan, why don’t I feel the kind of power I should have had? I am Lucifer Morningstar, the Creator. Yet I don’t feel as if I am.”

Leviathan sat opposite him and crossed one leg upon another. His smile was unforgettable and simple. “You are in human form, an appearance which limits the powers demons and angels possess. Humans tend to have that kind of effect on us.”

“That is why I hate them, brother.” Lucifer smiled. “I heard that a trickster, or some powerful being, broke me out of Purgatory.”

“Oh, yes, Manfred Croft.”

“I should have given him gifts for such an honorable duty.” Lucifer lowered his head and picked up a folder. “Poor thing died. But then I rose. Every fall has a rise,” Lucifer quipped.

Leviathan smiled. He looked around. The photographs were hanging on the walls. Beautiful lavish marbles sat on the ground. Articles from Post and Daily papers were scattered across the table depicting the following headline, ‘Longhorn Darcy is the new champ of the Matrix Corporation.’ Another read, ‘Longhorn Darcy, one of the ten most influential people in the world.’

“Why Longhorn Darcy?” Leviathan prodded.

“What do you mean?” Lucifer tapped a finger across his lip in thought.

“You could have taken someone else’s appearance, someone else’s form. Yet you took Longhorn Darcy’s, the youngest billionaire remaining in the spotlight wherever he goes.”

Lucifer smiled warmly. He pushed himself to his feet and walked toward the mini bar to pour a bit of wine in his glass. He took a sip. “Earth is going to face

doomsday in few days. Until that time arrives, I thought of living lavishly, like a king. It'd be fun. After all, I had such a long and boring time in that accursed place."

"That makes some sense," Leviathan replied. "But wouldn't it distract you from your main goal? The Armageddon?"

"You don't have to worry about that, brother. What did you think I was doing for so long in Purgatory aside from sleeping around? Hah. I know what we have to do. There is this…" he closed his eyes and took another sip of his drink, "thing you have to do. Call Mammon or Abaddon and try to find the Prophet. He knows things. More so, than we do. We should harness that information. I have something I must ask him. It is important. Bring him to me, no matter what."

Leviathan stood. "All right." "You heard my speech, brother?" "Of course."

"Then you know how much I care for success." He stepped closer to the other Prince of Hell, growling beneath his breath. "I don't want you to come here to my office and tell me, 'Sorry, I wasn't able to do what you asked because the plan was disturbed by a third party.' No, no, no, no!" He clenched his teeth together with all his might.

"If I hear this, Leviathan, if I hear this . . ." he repeated and grabbed Leviathan's face to force his head against his shoulder. "You don't know how sad or how bad I'll feel if things don't happen as planned. How much disappointed I will be." He was almost whispering in Leviathan's ear. "I'll forget that you were once my brother. Is that understood?"

"Y – Yes," Leviathan stammered.

A beaming smile crossed Lucifer's face as he let go of his brother. "Sorry for that. I scare people. I know." He embraced Leviathan tightly who was still rooted in place. "Come on." He patted his step-brother's arm. "Be a dog and go fetch the Prophet for me."

Leviathan bowed down in respect. "Hail, Morningstar!" he proclaimed. With that, he departed.

Lucifer narrowed his eyes and took a sip from his glass. He leaned upon the table and looked around. A swift knock upon the door drew his attention. "Come in," he said authoritatively.

Jack Hopkins strode into his office. A coffee stain marred his loosely buttoned shirt that hung open over his pants. "Yo, man."

"Yo? Is that a new way to say, hello?" Lucifer chuckled. "Come in and sit down." Though his voice wasn't cold or harsh, it was commanding in tone.

Jack sat down. He wasn't scared at all. "So...What's the answer?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you are young and you don't look like you are going to stand here as a chairman. Mr. Mann was a big man and old with wisdom in every word he spoke. You...well, you look like crap."

Lucifer didn't say anything. He stared at the man with amusement.

"See, no offense, you can fire me. My wife has left me and my son abandoned me. My parents are dead and my apartment is going to break down. My life is full of shit. I don't care if you fire me. After all of this, I just wanted some honesty."

Lucifer smiled broadly, his small teeth visible in the gloomy light. “That’s nice to hear. Nothing to lose.” He moved over the bar and filled his glass with more wine. “I wonder,” he mused.

His back was facing Jack. He turned about and handed him a glass. Jack gripped the glass and gulped it down completely. “I do wonder one thing. What is the point of living if there’s nothing to lose?”

The glass in Jack’s hand fell to the floor, shattering into a million tiny pieces.

***

He ran. He ran until he died.

The thought was pathetic. By running, he would exhaust himself and fill his lungs with screaming pain, but he wouldn’t die. Capernaum touched the ground. It was solid and soft at the same time, as if the mixture had a subtle feeling to it. He wiped the sweat as it dripped down his forehead that creased toward his bony cheeks.

The woods were dark. Peeping owls hooted. Twigs and vines intertwined. Quite a few places had tall pine trees. Thick fog made the place a tad misty. His long coat flapped around him as he landed upon the mud.

Ravens fluttered all around him. Shadows loomed from hidden corners. They made no noise, whatsoever. His ears prickled as he straightened, using the tree behind him for support. His heart beat furiously within his chest as shadows dodged his every movement. He licked his lips and tasted the saline of his sweat. The footsteps now were now clearly audible. A blue sheen drifted through the air and the temperature dropped. His hands were shaking, but it no longer mattered.

A low knife pressed against Capernaum's ear. Before his assailant could do more, Capernaum grabbed the hand and twisted hard, tearing it apart like a small toy. He turned to look at the other demon. He wore fashionable clothes, lavish cuffs across his coat, a tie, and bright boots on his feet. A name tag was clipped to the front of coat. *Cornelius Trumpet, Matrix Corporation.*

Matrix Corporation? Why were demons working in a corporation run by a genius named Longhorn Darcy? He had heard about Darcy. The way he talked with an aristocratic manner, the beautiful eyes he fixed on the public as if he were staring at the souls of millions of people, and the puffy suits he wore for each of his interviews.

Other knife was shoved into Capernaum, but he sharply yanked it out. The cut bled and spread across his shirt. It didn't pain him. Demons were not vulnerable to small cuts or stabs by an ordinary knife. They were if the blade was dipped within an angel's blood, but that was an entirely different matter.

He threw two punches across the demon's calf and thigh, his knee going straight for its stomach. The demon groaned. The sound was human. Capernaum tossed him aside and the body smacked into the tree, fainting upon contact. Without another thought, he ran. He didn't think about the fact that his lungs would fill with burning fire or that his ankle would sprain. He was thirsty, striving for food. Demons do starve and they do drink. They are like humans in almost every way.

If two demons had come to take him out, there would be others. What if there were more hiding behind bushes or the trees, or behind the fog, waiting for some signal to come? He needed a hideout, a haven. He was old. He'd worn an old man's skin for far too long. When a demon or an angel wears a skin, they remain in it

forever. He'd worn the one he was in when it was young and filled with enormous power and energy rivaling a world class athlete. Now, it was old and vulnerable.

A large house loomed in the distance, broken and tattered. It hadn't been used for quite some time. Windows were wide open, some damaged and dangling, allowing fallen leaves inside. The wooden structure struggled to keep up with the heavy gust of the winds. For the time being, he could use the place as a haven.

Grrrrrr!

A sound echoed from behind him. He turned, his coat floating in thin air. His surroundings were bright, though darkness penetrated in several places. Smoky blotches dotted the sky. A creature came out of the fog. It wasn't a demon. At least, none Capernaum could identify. It was a monster from the worst pits of Hell. Standing in front of him was a werewolf.

With thick black fur and silvery eyes, the werewolf stood his two feet. Fangs extended from its salivating mouth, growling at Capernaum. The fur had grown over the remnants of its scorched pants and shirt. The soles of its shoes had torn apart at the back. Its ears twitched. Furry hands with conical and bloodied nails remained still. It was bulky, broad, and strong. It waited for Capernaum to react.

RRRRRRRRR!

He growled ferociously, his rancid breath permeating its surroundings. Capernaum had sensed the existence of werewolves in the woods. Many bodies, dead as well as alive, had gone missing. Newspapers had said it was an animal, but they would never have imagined it was the amalgam of a man and a wolf.

Werewolves aren't friendly. They never are. Perhaps it's because of their tormented past, or because of the heaps of pressure and frustration on their nerves. Whatever the reason, werewolves are tough creatures to fight. They main source of

sustenance were demons. The bitter sweetness of demon flesh rejuvenates the wolves and incites their hunger. Werewolves had alliance with vampires, unlike folklores who gave different information altogether. Werewolves and vampires are on the same side, because they both suffer the same ends. They morph, they transform into something they don't want to, and they thrive for flesh and blood. They were reduced in numbers during 70's, but gradually started to increase during the wars. Most werewolves remain in woods, in hopes of feeding on deer blood or human blood.

This werewolf was lucky. He would feed on a demon's blood for today's snack. Capernaum, on the other hand, knew the werewolf wasn't lucky at all.

Capernaum's skin rippled in the cold. "You don't scare me."

"I am not here to scare you." English! This werewolf was familiar with the language.

"It always seems strange to see a werewolf talking,"

"We aren't beasts, demon. We are humans. We possess the DNA of wolves within us, is all." The werewolf walked carefully to the big warehouse, which resembled more of a post apocalyptic cabin the closer one got to it.

"Ah, I think you are a scientist." "Geneticist, actually,"

"What made you like this?"
"Experimentation,"

"Not bitten?"

"No," the creature replied, his voice full of disappointment. "I conducted a dangerous experiment on myself because the government was ready for the future."

Capernaum raised his brows. "Your future was pretty doggy, I assume?" "Don't provoke me, parasite."

Capernaum laughed. “We aren’t here to discuss this. Why don’t you tell me why you are here?”

“I heard about the Rise.” It paused. “My pack is not interested in such welfares, but then, I am not really into the pack thing. I also heard you were the only demon fighting on the side of the angels. Perhaps you are seeking redemption in the midst of chaos,”

“You can say so,”

“I don’t like this. I don’t like the Rise. Lucifer is the devil. I was raised a Catholic, so learning about the devil from the moment of my birth is a pretty bad-ass thing. I don’t want such chaos on this planet. That’s the reason I want to say, I am with you.”

“And you thought I would trust you?”

“Do you have a choice? Look around. You are in the middle of nowhere. I found you. You didn’t find me. Two demons attacked you. Yes. I know about that little encounter of yours.” The voice was strong and persuasive. “You are on a very big hit list.”

Capernaum was surprised. What hit list? He didn’t know anything about it. After the battle in the Land of Souls, he had escaped to Earth to find his way to his home, only to be driven into the woods by the demons following him.

“What are you talking about?”

“It is said that Lucifer prefers loyalty over betrayal. Who doesn’t? He, for my own knowledge, learnt about your fight with the demons and put a MOST WANTED tag on your name. You have a bounty on your head. Every demon, in support of Lucifer’s reign or not, will try to get you. In return, they would be gifted a grand position under Lucifer’s helm. Every demon’s wants you and Lucifer wants you dead,

no matter what. No one likes a cat among the dogs. Every demon is getting ready or is already hunting you."

"That's stupidity. How should I trust that this information is correct?" "I am a werewolf. We have good ears."

Capernaum looked up, feeling depressed. He was trapped. The demons were after him. Lucifer is angry with him. He touched the ground and knelt down. The moisture seeped into his skin. A warm breeze came and the slowly dipping sun could be seen above, its bloody orange color spreading far and wide.

"Fine," Capernaum surrendered. "We are allies now."

The werewolf came forward and extended his hand. "Let's shake hands and make our arrangement official."

In the warm morning light, his skin seemed to stretch across his jaw and skull. He resembled a skeleton. His black hair was plastered against the back of his head, its tips touching his long, thin neck. He brought his hands forward, though he didn't shake hands. He looked at the werewolf instead.

The silver eyes seemed honest enough for him to believe. Then again, he had no way to openly judge someone's facial expression or what they told you. It was simple. It was all right. Perhaps that's how life as. Sometimes you just have to take a leap of trust and faith without thinking twice or thrice or as many times as possible because the answer would be the same. It is said that when you are in trouble or in misery, even the ants look like angels to you.

He grabbed the furry hand. The paw was soft and gentle, like a toy a girl would want to sleep with her arms wrapped around it. The pads across its palms were rough and bloody, depicting the rugged adventure the werewolf would have faced.

"I am Capernaum."

“I know.”

“What’s yours?”

“Harvard Manning is my real name. But I call myself Eros.” “Is it true that werewolves have alter egos?”

“For me, Harvard is my alter ego and Eros is his alter ego.”

He looked up at the warehouse. “If I am going to stay here long, I would like some food and water, please. Most demons are at the markets so I wouldn’t be able to go there. I don’t have any money, either, but I hear geneticists make a lot.

“So I am to be your caterer?”

Capernaum grinned. “No. Not at all. You are my assistant.”

***

Caspar awoke. He could feel the terrible ache within his body. With a hand pressed against his back, he slipped out from under his blanket. The flaky morning shone over his eyes, blinding him with darkness momentarily. He closed his eyes and blinked twice. The blur was still there, but his eyes adjusted to the brightness. Cracking his stiff fingers and his neck, he slid his feet into his slippers.

He frowned as he realized he was wearing a pair of pin-striped pajamas. Why was he in pajamas? Who’d changed his clothes?

The scent of tobacco assailed his nostrils and they flared with disgust. The morning was ruined by the narcissist gargoyle’s addiction to cigars. On the bright side, he back in his manor safely ensconced within his room. Balthazar was sitting near the paneled window. Ivy was nowhere to be seen.

“Why aren’t we at Capernaum’s?”

“Demons are all over that house. Perhaps it’s because of Capernaum’s betrayal.”

“Oh.” He touched his forehead. It felt as if he were suffering from a high fever. “Where is...Where’s Ivy?”

The gargoyle hesitated. He was trying to hide something from his master. “Er...She is...She is outside upon the balcony. Alone.”

“Why is she there?”

“I am a frigging gargoyle, Caspar. The last thing you want to do is ask me about a girl’s well being, which by far, everyone knows I am bad at.”

Caspar ignored him. A fast talking gargoyle with a big mouth and a small brain was the least of his worries. He walked over to his wardrobe and stared at his reflection within the mirror. Small cuts scored the flesh around his neck. His forehead sported several bruises and cuts, as did his cheeks and his earlobes. He looked weak and a tad thinner than before.

The door opened. Balthazar grew invisible. Caspar could still see the suspended cigar with smoke trailing from it. Balthazar tossed aside so that he wouldn’t attract attention to the floating cigar.

“Master Socrates, where were you?” Lazarus bent slightly as he stepped inside. “All of us were troubled.”

“I was on vacation.”

“Where you got wounded?”

“It was a messy vacation,” Caspar admitted. “Those cuts look deep.”

“Yes, well, they can’t be helped.” Caspar clapped his hands together as he moved across the room. “I want you to make black coffee for me.”

Balthazar grumbled. “Make it two, will you?”

“All right, Master Socrates. The lady who helped you to come here is still around. Would you want anything for her?”

“Éclairs.”
“All
right.”

Lazarus turned and moved toward the room’s exit as Caspar grabbed his black

coat.

“You are familiar with women. Would you mind telling me what you think of her present behavior?”

“She’s encountered a grievous matter, Master Socrates. You might want to cheer her up.”

“Splendid, the morning could never be
better,” Lazarus bowed and disappeared.

Balthazar became visible. “Dear lord, how big is that man?”

“Seven feet. You would have guessed that by now, but little brains don’t always catch on so fast.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah.”

“What is the matter with Ivy?” Caspar asked.

“I didn’t really ask her, but perhaps it concerns a fellow named Ryun.” “Let’s find out, then,” he said and went off in search of Ivy.

***

Caspar pushed the glass doors open to greet the cool, bright morning. Ivy stood nearby, her hair pulled into a tight ponytail, the red tips curled gently about her

face. Her clothes were loose around her body and a small blanket was wrapped around her shoulders. Its sole purpose was to ward away the cold as she looked around balcony, every now and then. Caspar shoved his hands into the pockets of his pin-striped pants and walked up to her, leaning casually across the rail.

"Good morning," Caspar said.

"When I was five-years-old, Caspar, I had this dog named Toddy. I loved him. He loved me. We used to play a lot together. Our relationship was more than dog and an owner. It was of two inseparable friends. Then one day, he died. My parents said he didn't die, but rather he was sent to a farm where he would live happily ever after.

"I believed them. I believed there was this farm where happy endings are the only endings. But then I grew up and realized they'd lied to me. I don't blame them. I was a kid. Everyone tells a kid lies. I am not telling you this because I am missing Toddy or that a person close to me just died in front of me while I was kissing him for the first time. I am telling you this because I learned something out of it, something I would have never learned."

"And what is that?"

"That in real life there is no farm with happy endings. There is no fairy tale, where the prince falls in love with the princess and they live happily ever after. This is reality, pure harsh reality. There is only one ending and it's not happy. It's just a bitter, stupid thing that will happen to us. Death will reap us. Happy endings are a mere illusion shown in movies, on television, in novels. It makes you cheerful for a while and you have something to look forward to, but soon, it fades away. The only truth of the end is death."

“I am not really good at giving advice, Ivy. Such talks upset me. I agree with what you are saying. There are no happy endings, but you can make happy endings happen. You can be happy and live life just the way you wanted.”

“No, no!”

“Listen to me. Think about it. What have you always wanted to be? You are a Nephilim, but at some point of your life, you would have given a thought to having an occupation, a life.”

“I wanted to become a doctor.”

“Yes. Good. A doctor. Really? That’s impressive.” She smiled.

“Someone close to me said that people should be happy with small things. Small things make their present good, instead of trying harder and harder to make the future better. The future will be what it will be. We can’t do anything about it. The present.... Well, it’s right now. It’s right where we are standing discussing this. And you know who that someone was? It was you, Ivy Demetrius.”

“I said it because you were such a cynic.” “And now you are being one.”

“I lost someone.”

“People lose people, but that doesn’t mean they forget they actually have a life. Great people lose their close ones, but that doesn’t stop them from doing great things. They continue. They reap the rewards of the lives they live. That’s life, Ivy. Life is hope.”

“Thank you,” she breathed. “That helped.”

“Of course, it would have helped. After all, I am helping you.”

She slid her hand within Caspar's. He grew quiet and felt a little awkward. For the first time in his life, he felt something different. The feeling was one he could not brush off. His hands were cold, stark contrast as they curled about her warm hands.

"You have to promise me something."

"I am making a lot of promises nowadays." She thought of Ryun's promise in which she'd sworn an oath to defeat Lucifer.

"No, this is the easy one. When this ends, you have to promise me that you will study for the exam. You have to promise me you'll work in a hospital and help people. Will you promise me?"

"I am a Nephilim."

"Damn, Nephilim. I don't care. Nephilim is what you are, but what about what you want? Yes, you're different, but you're allowed to achieve your goals. If I were to have been in your place, I would have taken what I wanted because that's what I want to do. Promise me that you will study. You will pass and you will work in a hospital.

Promise me."

She nodded and a tear trickled down her cheek.
"Yes." "It's going to be all right."

She did her best hold back the rest of her tears, but they continued to fall. "There's this Nephilim funeral. I am going for Ryun and the others. Would it be too much to ask if you will come with me?"

"No."

Caspar had never done anything for someone except Death and that was because he had made a deal. Looking into Ivy's black eyes as she stood before him, he wanted to feel the change that was starting to take place within him. It was inexplicable and he couldn't quite make sense of it. A lingering feeling to help her

consumed him. Perhaps that's what caring was about, to help others and understand their problems.

She embraced him tightly. He couldn't find it within himself to return the hug. He wasn't sure if he liked the change taking place within him. Perhaps he didn't want to change so quickly, either.

"Um...I'm not really into hugging."

"Sorry," she said and smiled shyly through her tears. "I got carried away." "It happens," he murmured. "Do you like chocolate?"

"I love it."

"Then you might want to step inside. I am the cynic Willy Wonka." He grinned and winked mischievously at her.

Bu rial

Caspar didn’t know what to wear for Ryun’s burial. It wasn’t every day that he would end up being there for a girl who’d just lost someone she had a crush on. She also had friends and some cousins in the war. Nevertheless, his feelings were a tad mixed. At one point, he hadn’t care about her. Now, he was going just because she was a liability to him.

His feelings for her were a tad strong, as if fate wanted him to go with her to be there for her and take care of her as needed. He’d never taken care of anyone before, not even of his own self. The violent change going on within his life and his emotions was unlike anything he’d ever known. Somehow, he felt good. Perhaps it was because helping and caring for people does make a person feel good.

Ivy walked into the room dressed in a long black dress. Delicate pearls hung from her earrings. Her hair was swept to the side across one of her shoulders, her black eyes mingling with the glooming shadows of his room. He stood at the ready in a dapper suit his lucky muffler wrapped around his neck. The collars were pulled up. One of his hands was tucked inside his pant pocket as he strode in her direction.

Something bothered him. Perhaps it was the way she looked at him. When he’d first met her, he’d felt an intense hatred toward her. But as time passed, the irritation and hatred had faded to be replaced with other stronger emotions. The concept was one he couldn’t understand. The kind of emotion he was experiencing was one he wasn’t used to, something he’d never gotten from anyone, except in his early years.

“Thank you once again,”

“It’s...uh . . .” he stammered, unsure of what to say. “That’s what fr –” He growled as the word refused to spill from his lips.

“Friends?”

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

“You never had friends in your life,
eh?” “I never needed one.”

“Everyone needs friends at some point in time to care about their feelings and help them when in need,” she said.

His face was devoid of emotion. Being a sociopath, some of the things she went over his head. “I don’t understand. You have yourself.”

“One’s self is not enough.”

“That’s the Socratic Method for me. In life, you have yourself and no one else besides you. You walk on a road, alone. It’s the fact of life. End of discussion.” He clapped his hands and smiled. His nose flared in the process. “Fascinating. Shall we, Ms. Demetrius? I’ve always wanted to see Nephilim funeral. I wonder how they bury their own.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “Oh, we don’t bury corpses,” she said as she followed him out of the room.

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Nephilims had an entire world to themselves. Earth wasn’t their native land. When the angels came to mortals to consummate and have offspring, they learned their offspring needed a place, a haven, to grow and learn. Such a place was

constructed in another dimension and named Eden after the garden where Adam and Eve had been tempted by the snake and had partaken of the forbidden fruit.

Eden was to every Nephilim. They belonged here. Most of their training academies are located here and allowed them to learn martial arts from a very tender age. It's a part of their education. From the earliest of times, Nephilims have been part of the angel's order, acting as their executioners and standing as soldiers in their armies. They worked on Earth, patrolling and tracking demons. For this reason, they'd fought and died alongside the angels during the battle in the Land of Souls.

Acting as a bridge between the human and magical world, Nephilims are the police for other creatures. They place and enforce restrictions and constraints, as well as discipline other creatures so they wouldn't trespass the human domains. In a way, they're able to keep humans from suspecting the existence of magical beings across the face of Earth. Without Nephilims, Earth would have been in chaos.

Caspar found himself feeling a tad sad when he should have been excited. Ivy thought his behavior was a little odd. Yet she reminded herself that he was Caspar Socrates and everything he did was odd.

There weren't any portals to Eden. Nephilims used gateways to enter their home at will. The gates could be anywhere and only Nephilims know how to use them. Ivy informed Caspar of this face as she opened the gates they needed to enter. One such gate was found in one of the obscure subway stations where the tarnished floors and the corroded rails shook with every beat of a train's erratic speed. Newspaper stands littered the area, but they were empty.

Ivy approached a green door with the intent of pushing it open. As it swung inward, he followed her inside. It was a normal door and there was nothing special about it. He'd expected to find another room filled with humans at a coffin, sobbing

and remembering old memories they had of the deceased. What he found instead was something else entirely.

A purple sky spread far and wide above him. The blazing the sun wasn't golden, but rather a red color, striking its vengeance upon the land. Water flowed violently downstream, emptying into a noisy ocean with a fury Caspar had never seen.

Hundreds of Nephilims stood about, huddled together, away from big, broad rock tablets upon which the corpses were kept, bandaged from one end to another. Their style of burial was more like that of the Egyptians, for they, too, utilized the method of bandaging the dead in white cloth wrapped all over the body. Each tablet was set adjacent to one another.

Ivy scanned the tablets, looking for the one that held Ryun's body. His golden hair was combed off of his face and his blue eyes were now closed. A soft smile gently curved his lips. Nephilims wrapped in black robes were weeping, wiping their tears away and hugging each other as they leaned on one another for support. Women were holding their children, while men stood dispassionately beside them.

Someone strode through the crowd, a long, grizzled gray beard hanging from his chin. His shiny eyes roved over the throng of people as he carefully assessed the crowd. He wore a robe similar to what the rest were wearing, its hem drifting across the ground.

"I, Cassius Vorloff, have come here to this gathering of sorrow. A day has passed since our daughters, sons, and close ones died a horrible death." A sudden gasp erupted from the women as they did their best to hold back their tears.

"Shush," Caspar whispered gruffly at the bewildered women.

“But that is the way of the Nephilim. I don’t know what to say or how to say it well. The greatest enemy we have ever known has risen from his cage and is on the loose. The crux of it is that we can’t do anything about it.

“In earlier times, he crushed our ancestors during the Great War. Our sons, daughters, relatives, our close ones – they are now gone. They will never see the world collapsing upon us. Instead of being sorry for their deaths, we should be happy about it. Soon, we shall as well meet them ourselves on a more level plane.”

His words seemed hopeless. It felt as if he was waiting for his impending death. There may have been a time when Cassius Vorloff was a man with quick wit and answers, displaying a sheer bravado amongst his peers. Yet time had changed him, just like it changes everyone.

“Does anyone have anything to say?”

No one raised their hands. Until one suddenly appeared. It was bony and pale. “And you might be?”

“Caspar Socrates,” he said and strode out of the crowd.

Whispers and mutters started. Some said that they had never seen such a Nephilim. Others said he was not one of them, but rather a human. He stood before them as he came to a stop beside Cassius. Corpses littered the stone tablets with runes of all sorts spread around them to take them into the afterlife.

Caspar waved. “Hello. For the old ladies in the back who have nothing to do but grumble, I am not a Nephilim.”

Ivy arched her brows, clenching her fist within the folds of her dress. She was scared that he might end up say something offensive to the Nephilim race. She knew it was quite a possibility. Caspar let slip offensive things quite frequently.

“I wouldn’t have a soul which is crushed with no hope in it if I were. Your leader, Cassius, has lost hope, for someone close to him has died. I don’t care about that, though. What I do care is that Nephilims, as I know them from the scriptures, are the strongest race the Earth has ever been gifted with.

“Those scriptures have not depicted them when they lose hope. Nor do they show how they get scared like mice and scurry about to find a place to hide as soon as they encounter death. No. It’s not written. What is written is that they fight. They don’t care what the outcome will be. They fight, not to win, not to lose, but because that’s what they are supposed to do.

“I come here for the first time and see crushed souls. I pity you. You have lost people, many whom you’ve admired.” His eyes shot toward Ivy for a moment as she stood there with a stunned expression upon her face. “You loved. You cared. I know. I am not the kind of person who would understand things like that. But remember one thing, instead of losing hope and sitting idly in the face of such adversity, you can take revenge. Instead of lamenting the deaths of the fallen, you can fight for your loved ones.

“The gone shall not stand a second to see you crying like this, because they know and believe that you will avenge their deaths. Lucifer Morningstar – the devil, the fallen angel is the god of evil. He might be able to crush your lives and your bodies. But he will never be able to crush your souls.

“No. No. Not souls, never souls. A soul is what makes us – not Nephilims or humans, but men and women. He should know and he should be warned. He should be scared because we are coming hard. With our soul’s tremendous power and incurable hope, we shall fight. Nephilim or not, we shall fight until he slips into an everlasting sleep.”

Everyone was stunned. The tears had frozen. Everything seemed still and serene. Even the river and ocean seemed less violent. The powerful words that came out of Caspar's mouth were strong willed, though harmless in themselves.

"You don't know the feeling of losing someone," someone said.

"I might not know it, but if I were to, I would make sure the one I lost gets revenge in their next life."

No one said a word.

"Ivy, I think, I am ready to go," he replied softly.

A hand descended upon his shoulder and prevented him from walking away. He turned to find Cassius staring at him. The expression upon his face was different than before. Harsh words had crossed the path of their conversation.

"Son, the burial is not over," Cassius said, determination glinting within his eyes and he pushed him toward the crowd once more.

Caspar was able to witness the procedure for the burial of their dead. First, each family member stepped forward and presented something to the deceased such as a hat or a sword or some pendant the decease used to wear or used to have. The items were laid across their chests or on their foreheads with a bronze coin on top of it. It was said the coin would be used in the afterlife and the belongings would act as clothes for them. Nephilims believed in the afterlife and of resurrection, unlike Caspar, who believed that everyone has just one life.

When the process was completed, families pushed the tablets into the ocean. Ivy and Caspar pushed Ryun's tablet into the blue skittering ocean alongside Ryun's brother and sister as his parents had died. The tablets floated for sometime, but slowly, they began to sink as if water seeped into their pores and pulled them down peacefully.

Cassius came to stand beside Caspar, his robe fluttering across the ground. He pulled him away from the crowd and whispered into his ear. “Some don’t believe in what you say and think it is better to be on Lucifer’s side.”

“To everything, there is an opposition,” Caspar said.

“Exactly, but . . .” He gently rubbed the tip of a finger across his lip. “Some truly believe in this...in you. I am one of them. I am the leader, so I’ll try my best to gather as many Nephilims to this cause as I can. Many will not agree. There’s not much that I can do, though, I’m afraid.”

“At least you are
trying,” “What
should I do, then?”

“Take as many Nephilims with you and increase the security on demon sightings. Lucifer will be on the lookout for ways in which to bring about the Apocalypse, to immanentize the eschaton. You have to be ready. Whenever I am in need, you should be there.”

“Yes, sure.”

Caspar acknowledged him with a quick jerk of his head and moved away. “Thank you,” he said.

He stopped within his tracks. “What?”

“Thank you for bringing back a part of what we’d thought was lost.”

He regarded Cassius intently. Unwittingly, he’d changed many Nephilim lives in giving them hope to fight the fallen angel. He nodded briskly and hurried toward Ivy as she spoke to Ryun’s brother and sister, Quart and Daisy.

“We should go,” he replied as he tugged upon the back of her dress.

Ivy waved farewell to few people. They made their way set back to the station. The green door closed behind him. She walked toward a bench and sat down, taking a deep, unsatisfying breath.

"That was bad."

Caspar stood nearby with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. "You don't want to go home?"

"I am feeling out of sorts right now," she said and massaged her forehead. "I need some entertainment, something that'll cool me off."

"When I am frustrated, I get naked." Caspar smiled.

"That's not really appropriate for this kind a situation, don't you think?" she asked, the hint of a smile playing about her lips.

Caspar looked around. The station was empty. Even the sounds of the train were now inaudible. He brought his hand forward. "Take my hand," he suggested as his smile dissipated.

Confused, Ivy took his hand. He jerked his arm and pulled her forward. Their bodies met. Mere seconds passed they took note of the close proximity between them. His expression didn't waver. She was both amused as well as nervous. She wanted to ask what as going on, but no words slid past her cherubic lips.

He slowly curved a hand around Ivy's back, feeling her rhythmic posture through the fabric of her dress. He wrapped his other hand about her waist and held her tight, momentarily cutting off her air flow. She yearned to take a deep breath, but found herself blushing instead.

He stepped back and gave her a little room. Soon, it all made sense. Caspar was making her dance. Comfortably and swiftly, he spun her about and pulled her

back. Their skins slowly and softly touched, passion flowing vibrantly between them. He reached out to curl his fingers about her cheek and cupped it gently.

"You are purposely taking advantage of me, aren't you?" she asked. There was a naughty smile upon her face. "You are trying to touch me."

"In my defense, your skin is touching me." He winked. "When did you learn all this?"

"I've learned a lot of things, here and there." "That's impressive,"

"Are you entertained?"

"Yes, a lot. Thank you. Why are you like this, Caspar? You should see yourself right now. You are a totally different person. You are sweet and caring and you are lovable. Why do you act like a jerk in front of everyone else?"

Caspar's expression remained cold and harsh. He refused to answer her questions.

"What's the secret behind those golden eyes, eh? No one has golden eyes. What are you really? Why have you tread upon this path? Please, tell me."

"I think this is enough for today," he said and promptly released her.

He swiftly made his way toward the stairs. Ivy followed, pulling off her heels so she could walk freely. She grabbed Caspar's shoulder and forcibly turned him about.

"Tell me, please, Caspar. What is it you hide? Eh? What is the big secret behind Caspar Socrates? Why don't you unlock yourself in front of me?"

"I am already unlocked. You just don't see it."

"No. No, you are not." She swept her warm gaze at him. "You think you are, but you aren't."

“Someday, you will know. Someday, when you see right through me and find...You will see it, but unfortunately that day is not this day. I am not just hiding one thing, but many. Things that cannot be revealed to you now.”

“I wish I could say you are right.”

“Don’t wish. They never come true.” He hurried up the stairs, leaving the transcending beauty standing in the depths of darkness.

Vi rgil’s Confession

Later that night, after Ivy had gone to sleep, Caspar found himself wide awake. His curly hair was ruined and his eyes were swollen and sunken deep into their sockets. He sat within his chair and rubbed his scalp as he lost himself in thought. He was tired and deprived of slumber. He wanted to sleep, but could not. Raindrops crashed down to the ground outside, falling with great force and causing much noise. Lightning accompanied the loud thunder at odd intervals.

He’d gone down to his study table, drawing forth small piece of paper, thick and crisp, with yellowish color curling its edges. He produced a pen and started scribbling on a white piece of paper, his eyes growing darker as every word his mind imagined was scrawled across the parchment. Another round of thunder swept past as the letter was finished. He slipped it within a small folder and carefully dropped it into the nearest drawer. His mind roiled as he recalled what he’d written.

Ivy,

You wanted to know things, things I have been too afraid to even face. Things I have locked within the castles of my mind that should never be ever unlocked.

I intend on telling you, just not yet. Soon. Sooner than you expect. You will know that I am not the jerk you think I am.

There’s always a reason for everything. Soon, you will know mine.

With his thoughts sealed away, for the moment, he made his way down the road. He would try to create several portals to different locations. He’d indulged in

sorcery and magic, which had given him a brief idea of what was true and what was not. A portal was a short passageway from one place to another in a matter of seconds.

He found himself practicing a new way to open portal through time and space the next day. His current objective was one of the most difficult occult practices to ever be practiced and only high ranking warlocks were able to do it correctly. Time and space is a place, an infinite place where everything is possible. Losing yourself in time and space is worse than dying, because it could result in leaving you stranded in the future or it can push you into the past or through an alternate dimension you may never want to go to.

A bad memory surfaced of a time and space portal he knew how to build. It had been years since he'd done so and he hadn't tried it again. When he'd first attempted it, the disaster had changed his life and made him what he was now.

Caspar instructed Balthazar on how to properly create the portal. By swishing a seraph knife through the air, you could summon it, but doing so needed lots of practice even though it looked easy to do. Most of the time, the practitioner would get sucked inside the portal or would unintentionally bring someone out of it.

"What's the purpose of this time and space portal, Caspar? Why did you create one?" Balthazar asked, rolling his cigar around his mouth.

"I have no actual purpose for it. This is just something to entertain me," he

said.

"Oh, all right."

"Balthazar, I want to ask you something." Caspar brought his seraph blade down and walked to the window to face his reflection. The past few days had been

hectic. “I know you didn’t come with me because of that stupid superstition. I know you didn’t wait for me just because you wanted to have a nice afterlife.”

“No, no. That’s not true. What makes you say that, mate?”

“For several days, you have been smoking regularly. It is written in gargoyle norms that whoever invests himself in a mortals’ leisure such as smoking, drinking etc. will not have an afterlife and will die a horrible death. Yet you smoke all the time. That shows you aren’t superstitious and for all I know, you don’t give a damn about some afterlife.”

“Okay, I surrender. You are right.”

“So...What is the reason you accompany me in such dangerous adventures that could get you killed at any time?”

Balthazar scratched his rocky bald head. The gnawing sound of his claws rubbing against the hard stone was unbearable. Caspar twitched his eyes to bear it.

“The point is, my entire life, which is what...umm...Yes. For two hundred years, I have been called a loser and a coward. You know a lot about gargoyles, right? You must have the knowledge that gargoyles are warriors who fought in world wars, in civil wars, during the Black Death, and many other wars.

“They are strong warriors, protectors of kings. Even King Solomon used to have djinns and gargoyles as his executioners and hunters. My ancestors were actually the most powerful of gargoyles. They were considered to be of the Line of Gods due to their bravado.

“Everything went well. Their descendants were what they wanted to be, powerful, brave, strong, and courageous. Until I was born. They expected the same from me, but I – I turned out to be the biggest loser gargoyle that was ever born into their line. My grandfather hated me. My mother was the only one who loved me, but

she died. My brothers and sisters and all of my cousins actually laughed at me. On top of that, my father disowned me for being such a wimp."

"No father disowns his own children for such a stupid reason,"

"Well, my father did. He didn't care for me. A few years back, the witches trapped me and used me as a messenger to act between their coven and others until you freed me. I saw a sense of adventure in you and thought that perhaps my being with you might change my being a coward. For once, I want to prove to my dad that I am the son he always wanted. The son he always longed for."

"You are helping us in saving the world. Your cousins, they are doing nothing. Actually, they wouldn't even be aware of the fact that Lucifer has risen and is trying to bring about the Apocalypse. I just want to tell you, don't try too hard to prove it to someone. Prove it to yourself. And when you know you've proved your worth to yourself, go to your father and tell him that you are the honorable son he'd always wanted. Tell him was never the honorable father you always longed for.

"Yeah, only if I am able to prove, right? Huh?"

"You have already proved it. Not to him, but to me and to yourself. Don't wake up every day to prove it again someone, because some people don't deserve it."

To their astonishment, Death stepped out of the shadows. His staff was long and ivory, shining despondently. There were long shadows on his face, his weariness showing clearly. Tattoos glinted upon his bare chest.

"Capernaum has suggested that you two should come with me. He has someone you should meet," he said.

"What has happened now?" Caspar inquired "It's connected to Lucifer's plan."

Caspar and Balthazar turned toward each other until their gazes met. They nodded and approached Death.

"No, wait . . ." Balthazar sputtered. "What about Ivy?" "She's sleeping," Caspar replied.

"Let her sleep, then," Death suggested. "After all, I don't think she fancies torture chambers,"

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Caspar found himself in a warehouse. It looked eons old with iron windows and a cluttered ground. The smell within was nauseating. Balthazar waved his hand about to show that the smell was nastier than his own. They followed Death inside to a small room. Two silver eyes shot up from the shadows.

Alarmed, Caspar clutched his cane and prepared to attack. A thin man wearing a pair of glasses stepped forward. His hair ginger and looked a tad papery as it draped about the rough skin of his face. Freckles were scattered across his cheeks and his eyes were bright. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of an old and unfashionable coat. It clearly showed that the man wasn't familiar with his external surroundings. His pants were baggy and overgrown, hanging loosely upon his thin frame. He resembled a skeleton, of sorts, with its feet tucked into musty boots. He wore the façade like a loose robe.

"H – Hi."

The man waved his hand around in the most simplistic manner. Nothing hinted to any aspect of his dressing style or mannerisms. He looked meek, yet an intellectual aura surrounded him.

“I am Dr. Manning. Harvard Manning,” he said nervously. Caspar saw the sweat trickle down his forehead.

“You might be Caspar Socrates.” Caspar’s nose flared as the man spoke. “And you must be Balthazar. A gargoyle, that’s brilliant. Never seen one of your folks before, except in old cathedrals.” He stifled a laugh as he turned toward Death. “And you are Death.”

Shyly, he shook hands with everyone. He looked weak and tormented. Somehow it seemed to hide his true potential. He lacked the attitude of a gentleman and he smelled bad.

“Oh? Yes, I am Capernaum’s...Well, he calls me his assistant.”

“A human,” Death replied as his eyes roved across the other’s man’s stature. Harvard chuckled. “Not exactly a human. I was once and remember those days well,” he mused. His eyes lowered as he walked to a set of metal doors. “I am more than that, I’m afraid.”

“How so?”

“I am a monster,” the doctor replied, unabashed.

“From the inside, we all are,” Caspar quipped. He was trying to find that which made Harvard different from himself.

Harvard opened the door. Caspar found himself in a small circular chamber. A fan hung lopsided above them, spinning and agitating the stagnant air of the room. The warehouse was attached to an electricity plant somewhere outside the woods. The room had a very high humidity level. Capernaum stood at the far end of the chamber. His eyes sunk deep down into their sockets and his lips trembled. He pushed back his black hair as it curled upon his forehead.

Directly below the fan was a demon. Anyone would notice a demon off the bat. Unless it was wearing a human's skin. This demon, however, wore none. It was as if someone had purposely stripped it off of his thin, slimy body.

Demons are of various kinds. There are big and small demons, three-legged demons, three-armed demons, or two-headed demons. The only similarity between all of them was the sparkling tattoos or runes or marks that span the whole of their skin and whirled from top to bottom. Their skin is rubbery when they are in human form. It is said that when Lucifer was cast into Hell for disobeying the Will of God, he made demons and gave them these runes for protection and power as the fresh demons were nothing but the weakest of creatures.

"This is Virgil, commander of Abaddon's army," Capernaum explained. "Luckily, my assistant, Harvard, caught him in Brooklyn. After the due torture we inflicted on him, he gave us some information."

"What kind of information?"

"You might know about Matrix Corporation and of Longhorn Darcy?" Balthazar clapped hands with enthusiasm. "The youngest billionaire!"

"He's not what he seems to be." Capernaum walked around the roused demon as he sat stiff and furious. "He is Lucifer."

Death was caught off guard. They were stunned by the news. None of them had expected for such a thing to come about.

Caspar had heard about Longhorn Darcy. While switching channels, he'd seen him many times, giving interviews or immersing himself in public discussions in the news and meeting renowned people. Lately, his renown had grown than even before, as if some kind of energy had taken refuge within him. Things now made sense now to Caspar.

“It happened, perhaps, like this. Lucifer rose. He took a body, as the devil can’t wear human skin and helped to make Longhorn Darcy, a graduate from Yale, become one of the most powerful person’s on Earth.”

“So what about the Apocalypse?” Balthazar asked, confused.

“Well, there is no such thing in his mind, for now,” the demon said.

“That’s absurd!” Caspar exclaimed and he came forward, looking into the demon’s face. “He’s the devil. If he doesn’t want the Apocalypse, why was he so restless to break out of Purgatory?” he asked. “Why? Why isn’t he trying to bring Apocalypse?”

“He thinks Earth is a pathetic place with parasites living on it. When he came to Earth, his thoughts changed. He saw this Earth in a new way. He was fascinated by it. Fascinated by its rules and order and its progress. He didn’t want to destroy all of it. Instead, he took the body of a billionaire and became powerful without hurting anyone.”

“No, no, no!” Caspar’s eyes pierced the demon as adrenaline pumped into its veins. “There’s something you are hiding. Lucifer will never do that. You are hiding something. TELL US! TELL ME!”

Caspar’s voice was gravelly and threatening. He yelled loudly, his voice echoing throughout the chamber. Virgil was taken aback. His runes started to shine as dread coursed through him.

“I – I . . .”

“Yes. Yes, you are hiding something. I can see it in your eyes.” “I can’t risk my life. The Creator will destroy me,”

“Then you don’t know me enough. I will skin you alive. That’s worse than death,” he threatened.

“I . . .” he sighed.

Capernaum, Death, Harvard, and Balthazar exchanged glances. Virgil looked about and found no support in them. He lowered his head in utter despair.

“He – he’s...trying to bring a – a...Prophet in,” he said with hesitation. “And?”

“Nothing more. He told Lord Leviathan to do so. Somehow, he wants to use the Prophet for his own gain.”

“Thank you, Virgil.” Caspar straightened and looked around. “That will be all. Balthazar, I think we have some work to do.”

“On the way, boss.”

Caspar eyed Capernaum and Death. “I am going to find the Prophet while you play charades. Ciao.” He winked and exited the chamber without a backward glance

in their direction.

Ob eron’s Offer

Prophets...Like Isaiah and Job are old men chosen from the Heavens to receive visions of the future. They are one of the most important people in the world because it gives people hope of a better future and keeps the dominion of Heaven strong.

Prophets have been born on Earth since the beginning of mankind. They’ve brought forth knowledge of events that have changed the face of the world, filling men with the desire to go on living and keeping religion strong. They know more than they’re supposed to know and can potentially know everything, if they stretch their minds to their limits.

Caspar hadn’t heard about the Prophet until today. The demon’s confession had taken him by surprise. It was strange, eccentric, yet it was something that filled him with energy. Still, how was he going to find the Prophet? It was said, that in every century, one is born. Who was the chosen of Heaven in this century? It could be anyone. Perhaps even a talking animal or some creature from depths of Earth. Whatever, or who, it was made him excited.

He arrived at his house to find Lazarus and other maids keeping things in order. Balthazar made himself invisible so as not to freak them out. They made their way to Caspar’s study where Ivy was supposedly sleeping.

Lazarus encountered him along the way and drew his attention. “Master Socrates?”’

“Yes?” Caspar was surprised by his sudden appearance. “What is it, Lazarus?” “There was a guest here for Ms. Demetrius.”

“What kind of guest?”

"A girl, Master Socrates."

"I see," he quietly responded and frowned. "Thank you."

Lazarus departed and Caspar hummed under his breath. He wasn't a socialite, but now that fact was changing fast. His anti-social life of a maverick was turned upside-down. Walking gruffly, he made his way to the door. He pushed it open and found a brunette girl wearing tight jeans and a striped shirt with its cuffs folded up to her elbows inside the room. Her brown eyes were focused upon him and a sudden burst of energy passed between them.

For some inexplicable reason, Caspar's heart thumped erratically within his chest. *Why?* he wondered. Why was his heart racing?

"This is Joanne, Caspar," Ivy introduced as she appeared. "Joanne, this is Caspar Socrates."

"I have heard about you," she said, a sly smile sweeping across her face. "You are quite famous. My father works for the government. They're thinking of hiring you as a supernatural investigator."

"Are you serious? Is she serious?" he asked as he turned to Ivy while shaking hands with Joanne.

"I know her father and he does work for the government."

"Fascinating." Caspar smiled. "That calls for a feast, but not right now. We have work to do." The impulsive feeling he'd felt toward Joanne was starting to fade as he walked into the room. "The Prophet...The Prophet...Where could a prophet be? How shall I find him? Ah!" He clapped his hands with excitement. "Goblins? No!"

"Fairies, I suppose?" Ivy suggested.

“Fairies? Why would you say...? Oh. Oh, I see. Fairies are the kind of entities who would put their nose where they are not supposed to? Of course!” He searched through the shelves and started tossing books aside.

“Is he a psychopath?” Joanne whispered.
“Correction: a sociopath,” Caspar abruptly replied. “What are you trying to do?” Ivy asked.

“Trying to find the fairy,”

Caspar knew that Death had his way in and around the universe. Death reaped everyone’s soul, be it human or fairy. Thus, he’d know about Oberon.

Oberon was the king of fairies. He controlled the realm and had created the race itself. In actuality, he was an angel who’d abandoned his duties and made his own distinct race. He was never seen by anyone after that, for he lived deep within the pastures of the fairy realm known as Antasia. Many have sought him, but have never been able to find him as of yet.

Fairies weren’t exactly the cute and beautiful kind like Tinker Bell who sacrificed themselves for others. No, not at all. Caspar used to think they were just like what they were depicted to be in books and cartoons, until he’d hunted some of them.

They were manipulative creatures that like to play with mortal minds. They seduce, persuade, and influence just for the fun of it. They don’t sprinkle dust on humans and make their wishes come true. Nor do they fulfill other fairy venues such as have been seen in movies. When angry, they’re capable of clawing people to death. Calculative and manipulative, they are Caspar’s number one enemy.

Yet, he needed their help. He knew fairies were the only creatures that kept their eyes over everyone and every thing. They would already know that Lucifer has

risen, but they would be the least worried about it, as they would not be affected by the outcome of his actions. Lucifer would never meddle in a fairy's business if he could avoid it. Fairies get their information from various sources here. Their sources are always reliable. They could be helpful in obtaining information, but you had to be on their good side in order to achieve such bounty.

"Are you sure about this?" Death asked as he materialized within the room. Caspar had summoned him to talk about his plan. He needed Oberon to be of

help to them.

"Have you seen him with your own eyes?"

"Of course I have. I am Death." He scowled and pursed his lips as he lost himself in thought. "Other fairies think of him as an unknown godfather. As for me, he is a malicious manipulative bastard."

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It didn't take much time for Death to vanish in mid-air and grab hold of the Lord of the Fairies. Death was powerful and he was old. He pulled an old, crumpled-looking man out of the portal effortlessly. He wiped his hands as if he'd been contaminated in touching him.

Oberon wasn't what Caspar had imagined him to be. He'd expected him to be a big, bushy bearded man with long hair and lavish clothes. Yet in front of him stood a man that was trying to stand up on his feet with the help of a cane with a jaguar-shaped knob.

His head was bald and his eyes protruded slightly out of their sockets. His lips were feverish and quivering. His long ears resembled that of leprechauns. He wore a

green shirt with a brown jacket on top and loose, smoky pants. The King of Fairies wearing human clothes.

"Many have wondered whether you've been within the fairy realms when, in fact, you've been on Earth having fun," Death chided.

"I am an old man, Death. Fun is a part of life at this time." He turned a wide, manic smile upon Death. He was nothing like the fairies he'd created. A fairy was supposed to be kind and sweet with a honey-like voice. Here, however, things were different.

"I need your help," Caspar said.

"Three wishes. That is all," Oberon reiterated as he dusted off his jacket. "I don't need your stupid wishes." Caspar exchanged a long glance with

Death. "I need your help in getting information."

Oberon's frown turned into a big smile. While leaning on his cane, he walked around Caspar, his watery and milky eyes trained upon him. "Oh? I see information. Learned from someone that fairies always get a bit of a piece of the big pie, did you?" His voice was so smooth and his raspy breath was difficult to be heard. "What kind of information you want?"

"The location of the prophet."

Oberon's raised his brows. "The Prophet. Interesting. Why the prophet?" "That's none of your business."

"It is of great importance to the one who is going to tell you the information you so desire."

"All right." Caspar exchanged another look with Death. "I need the Prophet because I need to see how I will die." He regretted his words as soon as he'd said them.

Oberon narrowed his eyes. He sniffed air and said, “You smell this?” No one answered. “This is the smell of a lie.” He stared at Caspar’s denim pants and sniffed the air once more. “I don’t see your pants catching on fire, though.”

Caspar didn’t move. Clearly, Oberon could find out who was a liar and who was not. With his fish-like eyes, he kept staring at Caspar and then at Death.

“Seriously guys, when you want to be good liar, don’t go with the obvious lies.” He paused. “What is it, then?’”

“Lucifer has risen from his cage in Purgatory. He is after a Prophet. Why he needs a Prophet, I have no idea, but there must be some reason, so we need to find the Prophet before he does.”

“Ah, this is just splendid! Conflicts between good and evil. I have seen this many times.”

“So? Oberon, I think you should tell us. You remember Antarctica, don’t you?” Death warned, his voice menacing. “Three decades. Now it will be five.” “All right. Fair enough. Though, I need one favor in return for this sort of

information.”

“I’ll kick your ass, fairy godfather!” Death grabbed Oberon by the collar. “No, wait, Death.” Caspar brought his hand forward. “You might freeze him

in Antarctica for fifty years, yet he would not tell us about the Prophet.” He looked at the King of Fairies. “What do you want in return?”

Oberon smiled. “Now we are becoming reasonable, aren’t we?” He pulled himself to his feet. “I need a favor. It’s a good favor. It’s not that much of a hard work, per se. I am an egoistical fairy, you see, but I hate when someone hurts my ego. Lucifer Morningstar did just that by chaining me within his clutches for further requirements. I am like a dog tied to a leash. I don’t like being tied to a leash. It’s

pathetic. I am the King – the God of Fairies. My kind worships me. But I am tied like a dog." He clenched his teeth together. "He has leashed a god and that is absurd."

"I don't see any chains."

"You can't see it, because you are not looking for it."

With those very words, Caspar saw the chain magically appear. A metallic collar was wrapped around Oberon's neck with a long chain clipped to it. "You see, I am a dog."

"Indeed. And not a cute one, mind you," Caspar said. "Why does he need you? What further requirements must you fulfill?"

"I am the god of fairies. I can be very useful sometimes, if you just know the right way to bind me. Unfortunately, Lucifer knows." He paused. "Lucifer holds a...What do you call it in mortal language? An apple. A black, ashy apple. I need you to smash that apple until it breaks into pieces. When it does, I'll be free."

"Okay, I can do that. Just put an oath on my arm,"

"No, no, no. Now, this is the tricky part. I don't trust you. Humans have always meddled in fairy affairs. That's why we like to slice them and have them as a treat. I need you to break that apple first and then come back to me in return for the bit of information you so desire.'

"I am not going to do that. You have to trust me." "Well, that's what I am bad at."

"I'll get killed."

"Probability of living and dying is in every scenario," Oberon laughed. "This is my offer. You need my help. Therefore, you need to help me. Go to the Matrix Corporation and find the apple. Break it and come back to me. It's as simple as that!"

Caspar had always been a daring boy. From the beginning of his teenage years, he had been daring. But now, entering a suicidal place was much too daring. He knew he had no choice. He had to help Oberon. He could take help from another fairy, but Oberon was the only one who would know the Prophet's location. He was the King of Fairies, after all.

"Fine. I'll do it."

Death was taken aback. "No, human!" he spat in irritation. "I will interrogate him. I'll squeeze the information out of him."

"We don't have that sort of time." Caspar looked quickly at Death. "I need to do it. His offer might be dangerous, but it could help us."

Death rolled his eyes. He hated the idea. His only executioner would be going into a place where death was inevitable. It was what he wanted. He realized he cared for Caspar, even though he considered him to be as cold as a stone and unemotional.

"Okay then," he said, moments later, "But he will remain with me under surveillance, until you break his chain and he gives me the needed information."

"That's a bad idea," Oberon said feebly.

Death wrapped his arm around the reluctant fairy. "We'll have fun, you and

I."

Oberon gritted his teeth. "Your presence is worse than torture."
Caspar pulled his collars up as he watched Death and Oberon walk out

together. He glanced at the window and peered at the blurry skies above. Balthazar hovered near the corner and said, "Are you ready?" Caspar gave him a wispy smile. "Always was."

Balthazar grinned, his eyes shining with deliberation. "I'm in."

Si nners

Matrix Corporation, a multi-national company, utilized a skyscraper extended toward the heights of the blue sky as its head office. Its conical top gave the impression of a needle piercing a soft blue cotton fabric. Employees worked hard round the clock, oblivious even to their families. Some of them were metamorphosed demons. Human workers were ignorant of the activities of the demons around them.

Getting into the building was easy, especially for Caspar. He made his way to the entrance, pretending that he was a drunken fellow and needed to use the washroom. The receptionist took pity on him and showed him the way. When he entered the washroom, he found a white floor spreading out before him beneath a high ceiling. He heard the tapping of the receptionist's shoes slowly fade away.

He peered out and found the coast clear. He closed the door behind him. From his satchel, he pulled out a security guard uniform and a black hat. He pulled it on and stuffed his trench coat within his bag. He tugged the hat over his curly hair. The large jacket of the guard uniform was wide enough to hide the leather bag that hung across his chest. He opened the door and made his way along the corridor.

Two employees wearing black suits grew closer. They were quiet as they walked along. They were stiff and frowsy. He easily identified the demons. Caspar lowered his head and pulled the cap low across his brow as he walked past them. Their red eyes wept over the anonymous guard, but they discarded the notion that they'd seen him somewhere. He soon found himself near a lift. He kept his head down and looked at his shoes.

The lift opened and Caspar entered it quickly.

***

Longhorn Darcy wore a sleek gray suit as he strode into Wozniak's office. Wozniak was a computer genius, an engineer, and a vital human resource for Matrix Corporation. Without him, the corporation wouldn't tower high above other IT companies. Wozniak, though, was never appreciated for the work he'd done. Until he'd found him working along one night.

"Mr. Darcy, please come inside." A shiver of nervousness rippled down his spine, his eyes becoming perceptibly dim. "What brings you here?"

His knowing smile said, 'I want success. And you will get that for me.' He looked around to find piles of rugged files and scores of folders scattered across the floor. "You are quite a working fellow, Wozniak. I appreciate that."

Even though his words were warm, there was something cold about him. Perhaps it was something in his eyes or the way he spoke in a husky, deep voice.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy,"

"Tell me, Wozniak," he said, pinning him with a corrupt look and a malicious smile. "Why are humans such interesting specimens?"

"Um...Uh...I dunno, sir."

"Take a guess." He approached the overflowing desk and leaned against it with his arms crossed upon his chest.

"Maybe because they are so advanced?"

"Wrong," he replied in distaste as if he hated wrong answers. "Some of them amongst this bunch of idiots are intelligent humans. Some are quite intellectual, but they're not appreciated. And you, my friend, are one of them."

“W – What do you mean, sir?”

“You are promoted. You are now the head of this office, more like a CEO. I need good people working under me, not just flabbergasting idiots with stains on their white shirts. All right?”

“Y – Yes, sir.”

“Good. And one more thing . . .” His finger slid into the air as he explained things. “Do you know why humans are so stupid?”

“No, sir.”

“Take a guess,” he goaded as he slid closer to Wozniak. His hand slid his back. “Again.”

“Because they are j – just stupid?”

Longhorn laughed throatily, the soft sound reverberating throughout the shadowy room. His arm tightened upon Wozniak’s back and he could almost feel the bones being crushed. “Because they don’t know how to keep secrets. They have a knack of telling secrets, even though they don’t know how much pain . . .” The word came like an absolute warning. “How much evil will happen if they divulge them. Nor do they know of the consequences they will face. Tell me, Wozniak . . .”

“Y –Y . . .” he stammered. He was too scared to say more. The searing look on Longhorn Darcy’s face plunged him into the abyss of his worst nightmares.

“Do you know how to keep
secrets?” “Y – Y . . .”

“Is ‘Y’ your answer?” There was no a hint of smile now. Just an excruciating look on his face full of anger. “Is that your answer, Wozniak?”

Wozniak shook his head, sweat dripping down his forehead, his cheeks, and his nose. “N – No, sir.”

“Good. So once more I’ll ask you, Wozniak, do you know how to keep secrets?”

“Y – Yes sir.”

“Are you one of those stupid kinds who like to just spill important secrets about someone, about the company they work for, even though they know what will be the consequence doing so?” Longhorn clenched his jaw.

“No, sir,” he said as he shivered.

“So why on Earth did you tell our rival company about the new design we were making for the welfare of the people?” Longhorn asked as his skin grew warm.

“It was just...a...a...slip of words. I am sorry.”

“Slip of words,” he mused. “Oh, I see. It’s a mistake. A simple mistake committed by every human. Am I right? If you do this again, I will skin you. I mean it. And yes, I am warning you. If you want to tell the police, it’s fine with me, but you know as well as I do, they can’t touch me. So, are you going to say it again? Are you going to slip important secrets about us to the other company?”

“N – No, sir.”

“Marvelous!” He let go of his shoulder and Wozniak breathed a sigh relief. “This office...It’s boring. You have a nice office upstairs, next to mine.” Longhorn smiled broadly, trying to be as warm as possible. “GOOD TALK,” he said, offering Wozniak his favorite corporate smile as he closed the door behind him.

***

Caspar was lucky. The corridors were empty when the lift opened. He knew where Lucifer’s office was. He’d seen it in one of his interviews of his as he’d shown

the reporters around, pointing out how furnished and how compatible to the surroundings the furniture was. Walking slowly and making no noise, he found himself in a circular chamber where two men in black suits sat, flipping through the pages of the magazine. They looked up, their eyes ruby red.

"May I see your ID card?" one of them inquired as he got to his feet.

Caspar gave him a tongue in cheek smile that he usually saved for distracting his enemies. "My ID? I wonder whether having an ID or not having an ID is as equal is having an ID. After all, we don't need ID for showing who we are or where we belong or to what city we belong. Do we have badges on our chests saying HUMANS? Well, of course not!" He moved about, talking in an offensive manner in hopes of distracting them as he rubbed his hands together. "But it does make me wonder . . ."

"Sir, the ID?" The demons weren't baffled.

"All right, all right. You are a wee bit curious, aren't you? Now, now, where did I keep my . . ." He searched his bag, hands vigorously touching the soft leather until he found the small vial. "Yes, here it is."

He uncapped the vial and flicked his hand so that it splattered through the air and drenched the demon in front of him. The water wasn't ordinary water. It was Holy Water.

A burning sensation rippled through its skin. Smoke was visible and sparks flew until the demon's face turned to ash. The other demon pushed its wing out of its suit and its face changed into a giant bat with runes and symbols all over it. The human skin sifted the floor coated with black blood.

Caspar twisted his cane's handle. The sudden glow blinded the remaining demon. Caspar closed his eyes as he rolled over and swung the blade about, cutting

through the fog. The light dissipated and he found the creature lurking behind him. Its talons clawed his jacket until it was in pieces. It then threw him across the room toward a painting. His face smashed into it with such force that a large bloody bruise formed near his mouth. He smeared the blood from his lips and frowned.

"You shouldn't have done that." The demon looked on and waited.

Caspar growled. "I shall do worse things to you," he said and winked. The demon's wings grew as it puttered about the room. He groped around Caspar as he faced its soft, rubbery skin. Without another thought, he plunged his shotel into the demon's wing. Its loud shriek grated within Caspar's ears. It was like hundred orchestras with bad musicians were being played together upon a huge stage.

He tossed his blade aside and covered his ears. The demon puffed into thin air, flakes of ashes fluttering to the ground. Despite the fact that the demon was, Caspar could still hear the sound of its cry. He wiggled his finger within his ears in hopes of clearing the sensation.

Once he was satisfied that he no longer heard the creature's wail, he turned his shotel back into a cane and made his way toward Darcy's office. Along the way, he took off the once tattered jacket that was now in one piece. He loosened his muffler and pulled up the trench coat's collar as he entered the room.

He found it elegantly furnished. Centralized air conditioning came in through a ventilated grill. An unoccupied silken chair sat behind a small round table. A plush carpet covered the entire floor, its red color seeming strange, yet magnificent. The room was quiet an unguarded room. Perhaps it was because Lucifer didn't like being interrupted by anyone.

He walked over the table and started rifling through its contents. It was his only chance since Lucifer was not there. His eyes fell upon numerous folders. Wearing his black-rimmed spectacles, he examined the folder. His eyes grew wide as he saw the designs of hovels where humans would reside by the hundreds to be used for labor. There were also places where demons would party. Every part of Earth was colored with red, showing that parts would go to those who would work against their own race because they knew they would lose and Lucifer would win.

He was fostering treachery amongst many as he had done with the Nephilims. Briefly, he remembered the burial. After wiping off the entire human race, leaving a few behind, Lucifer would not destroy the world, but preserve it as his own medal. It would be his own domain where many would worship him and he would rule.

He moved away from the folders. His hands shook as he reached for the black apple that lay upon the glass table. It was beautiful and splendid. Caspar had a hard time holding on to it. It was both warm and cool to the touch and was rather delightful to hold.

He didn't want to throw such a beautiful thing upon the floor, but he did so, none-the-less. It fell without making the slightest noise and shattered into pieces, sprinkling its dust all over the ground.

The doors opened noisily. Caspar looked up. Longhorn Darcy walked inside with a big, welcoming smile. Two demons followed in his wake.

"Caspar Socrates! You have no idea how happy I am to see you," Lucifer said, his eyes glittering with menace. He made his way toward a red sofa.

Caspar was pushed to the floor by one of the demons. "I see what a wonderful guard you have! How violent," he said with a cheeky smile as he slid out of the

demon’s grasp and hurried to the opposite sofa. Like a bumbling fool, he rested against it.

Lucifer held a glass of scotch within his hand. “You don’t seem as I expected you to be.”

“Well, you don’t have horns and wings.” Caspar smiled. “We aren’t what we expected, don’t you think?”

“Are you acting your way out?”

“Oh, no. No, no.” Caspar shook his head as he scanned the entire room for a means of escape. Unfortunately, there was only one door and it was guarded by two demons. “Why would I do that, eh? Your presence is what I desire.” He chuckled as he stood up.

“Why are you here, Mr. Socrates?”

“It’s not every day you find out that a corporate billionaire is the devil. I wanted to meet you. To meet the Devil himself.”

“By breaking into my office?”

“I expected that you would be here.” “Yes, well, I wasn’t.”

“Whose fault is that, then?” Caspar gazed at the trophies and medals belonging to the real Longhorn Darcy.

Lucifer sipped his scotch. “I heard you were one of the few who didn’t want me to rise.”

“How preposterous,” Caspar said. “Whoever told you that?” “Half of my men.”

“But the other half didn’t, I gather?” “How could they? You killed them.”

Caspar's mouth twitched with amusement. His bronze eyes knowingly sparkled. He examined the trophies and medals closely. He then moved on to the photographs of Longhorn Darcy meeting Dalai Lama, Barack Obama, and other great people for his achievements at such a young age. His heart raced. Any second, any minute now, a blade or a claw could be pierced within his heart and he would succumb to a painful death. He knew he had to be fearless. For all he knew, Balthazar was listening to everything, but he hadn't done anything as of yet.

Lucifer smiled viciously. "You are with the rebel alliances?"

"Well, yes," Caspar replied as he continued to examine the photographs. "Was that your only option?" Lucifer asked as he came to stand beside him.

"Was that what you wanted? To be against me?"

Caspar didn't reply. Anything he said would cause a reverse action, something he wanted to avoid, at all costs. His eyes continued to dart about in search of something that could help him escape.

"I am going to offer you a business proposition, Caspar" Lucifer said. "Because I know if you would have gotten other options, you would have at least thought about opting for them."

"What is the proposition?"

"Join me. I know you have great potential. You work for Death. Death doesn't appoint anyone daily, certainly not a mortal!" he laughed. "A mortal with limited knowledge and power. Death has surely seen something in you. Which is why it makes me curious. I received news about you from someone the day before."

"What kind of news?"

"That you have an Achilles' heel," Lucifer mused. "That's the reason you are still living. Else, you would have died. That's the reason Death appointed you to the

position you have now because you are invincible, just like Achilles. But unlike Achilles whose defiance cost him, you keep yours well hidden. Not even you are aware of it. The main thing is that I don't care where it is. I care that if a person with an Achilles' heel is born in this century, I want to get my hand on him, no matter what."

Caspar chuckled. "That's horrendous! I would have known if I had such heel." "That's the problem. You don't know." Lucifer clenched his fists. "I need a

powerful slayer, an indestructible person who could help me and would be on my side. You are that person. You have an Achilles' heel. By not allowing anyone to know where it is, you cannot be killed. You cannot be killed, Caspar," he said vehemently. "Think about it. About not being killed. You will only die of old age, or until your heel is discovered. Only then, would you be vulnerable. I need a fellow like you. So the proposition is this: join with me and we will rule the stars!"

"By ladder or lift? Stars are much too far in space."

Lucifer grunted. A taunting, malicious smile threatened to creep upon his thin lips, yet he held it back, despite the urge. "I am not joking here, Socrates."

"How would I have received the heel in the first place? It isn't like I bathed in the River Styx."

"Not everyone acquires a heel through the River Styx. Some just get it on their own. Some are chosen. Luckily, you are one of the chosen ones."

"Bah!" Caspar spat. "That is preposterous! Chosen? Me? That just happens in movies."

Lucifer lowered his head and took a deep gulp of his drink to prevent his lips from quivering. He looked up abruptly, his eyes glinting. "The thin line between

imagination and reality is breaking, Mr. Socrates. It is being erased. Soon, there will be no difference between them."

"How are you so sure about that?" Caspar's jaw tightened. Flashes of anger and hatred brightened his eyes. He wasn't the bumbling fool he became when trying to distract his enemies. He was back to his original demeanor, purely arrogant and quite astute.

"Because I am the one who will break it," Lucifer said. "Why are you doing this, Lucifer? You are an angel."

Lucifer scoffed. He found the notion irritating. He seemed so genuine when he asked him about the big WHY. There were so many reasons, so many streaming memories he'd forgotten that came back to his mind in a flourish, straining his brain and creating a headache and trauma.

"I was once an angel. Until my own father, whom I loved the most . . ." Tears welled up within his eyes. "Until he threw me down into that pit and cut off my wings. Do you have any idea how much it hurts when the person you love, admire, and respect the most leaves you alone, all alone in a dark, tormenting place where no past, present, or future exists?"

Caspar couldn't answer his question. He had no idea as to kind of existence that was like. Granted, he could only imagine such a thing, but he preferred not to. Still, Lucifer seemed to be traumatized by what he'd gone through and for a short while, he felt pity for him. He was like a small child, whose plight dug deep into a person's heart.

"I felt bad. I felt angry. Angels were never meant to have emotions, but I had...I had powerful emotions and was filled with hatred. Not for my father, but for those pathetic beings who took my place. Do you know why my father threw me

down? Because I protested. I protested in favour of my own kind, for myself, that we angels should receive Earth as our own. We didn't want to see it go to those primitive apes that didn't even know how to talk and were filled with their disgusting smell and their . . .” He stamped his foot angrily.

He was not sure, but Caspar swore he felt the Earth shaking.

“I wanted us – myself to be here, to be on Earth. I wanted my brothers and sisters to stay here, not some degenerate race. So I asked. I resisted. I rebelled against the Will of God and I asked my father, ‘Why can't we live in a place where we, in reality, belong?’ He didn't say a word. Unlike everyone, I asked Him this, which was a sin. What kind of sin is that, Caspar? Eh? What kind?

“Father told me he created humans to live on Earth. I didn't want that to happen. And then a hard truth hit me. He loved the degenerates more than he loved us. He loved them more than his own loyal sons and daughters who had always taken care of Him, who had always assisted Him in whatever he needed. Instead, he loved you. Your kind. Your race. I resisted and collected a group of angels who supported me. Such actions were not tolerable by him and he threw me down into that pit instead.”

Sadness filled him as Lucifer told him his story. He wasn't sure as to why he was feeling the way he felt. Even though he was the one who'd created evil, Lucifer had a dark past, one he was afraid to reveal. A past he wanted to keep inside and never let go from the confines of his heart. Lucifer had a soul. He was just a child trying to seek the love of his father. In his heart, he just a small child.

“I got angry at my father, at the parasites, and I took an oath. I shall have my revenge by destroying the creation my father made. I made demons out of myself and they bore offspring's. The rest is history.”

He paused and with pain showing in his eyes, he said in his saddest tone, “I wasn’t bad. I wasn’t evil. I never was. I just wanted, for once, that our father appreciate that we gave them our souls and bodies. And in return, we wanted something. Think about it, Caspar. He was the one who created evil.” He pointed to himself, angrily and grievously. “If he hadn’t thrown me down in the first place, I wouldn’t have become what I am now – The Devil.”

“If you were so good, in the first place, why did you sin against your father?” “What sin have I committed?”

“Greed,” Caspar replied succinctly. “Your father created Heaven for the angels so they could live there without thirst, without hunger, without darkness. You had a perfect life, but you ruined it because you were greedy. You wanted Heaven and you wanted Earth. So you tested your father’s patience by going against Him, by betraying Him, by not being loyal to Him, after you collected a group of angels for yourself. You stabbed Him in the back.”

He turned to look at the fallen angel, his gaze level and firm, locked with a dispassionate anger and intrigue. “All the while, Lucifer Morningstar, you’ve blamed someone else, when you should have blamed yourself.” He approached Lucifer, standing eye to eye, nose to nose. “BECAUSE LUCIFER, YOU WERE EVIL FROM THE BEGINNING. NO ONE BUT YOU CREATED EVIL!” He yelled so loudly that the two demons grew alarmed. “You blamed others because you were filled with pride. You can’t stand the idea that you were the first one who sinned. Not Adam, or Eve, but you. You!”

Lucifer was stunned, though it didn’t show upon his face. His face was rigid, his jaw tight. He coughed and clutched the glass tightly. He looked back at the

demons and said, “Escort Mr. Socrates outside.” He looked at Caspar’s angry face. “I hope you have second thoughts about my proposal.”

Caspar refused to answer. He strode past the demons and encountered no resistance. All the while, his cane tapped and clanged upon the floor. He disappeared without a backward glance in their direction.

Confused, one of the demons said, “Master, why did you let him go?” “Because I need him, Torch,” he replied and stepped forward. “When you need something, you have to let it go.”

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Caspar found himself once more within the dinger. The chef pulled out a long barrel shotgun with a double-hinged handle. Suddenly alert, he aimed it at Caspar who stepped back with his hands up, his lips tightening in confusion as he saw a pale man on the ground. His pupils were dilated and white. The pregnant waitress and the other customers were yelling and shrieking in fright. The only ones left in the diner were a corporate man with jet black hair, a family with a teenage daughter around Caspar’s age, and a sheriff with a long, round hat upon his head.

The sheriff pulled his magnum free and ordered the chef to put down his shotgun. “I am taking over from here. Y – You just put that thing down, Mister! I am here and the authorities will be soon, as well.”

The chef lowered his gun with hesitation, his hand shaking.

“Now, you son of a bitch,” he said, his deep, burning eyes trained upon Caspar. “Put the cuffs on.” He pushed a pair of metallic round handcuffs across the floor.

Caspar remained quite and stared at the handcuffs. His face was severely pale, as if every fluid, every color, and everything else had been sucked out of his body. He didn't react. He was too stunned as he tried to figure out what was going on.

"PUT THEM ON!" the sheriff yelled.

"O – Okay!" Caspar pushed his hands forward and slowly knelt to pull the cuffs to him. He circled the metal about his wrists and found a painful numbness that hadn't been there before. "Done. I – It's done. See?" He lifted his hands to show that they were tied together.

The sheriff came closer, wiping the sweat off of his brow. He examined Caspar's cuffs to make sure he hadn't tricked them. Satisfied that the cuffs were fine and that he was tied, he clutched Caspar's collar and pushed him toward the nearest chair. "Now, you sit down. You sit right here and don't fucking move. You fucking understand that? Eh? You understand that right? If you move, I will blow off your fucking head."

Caspar remained rooted in place as numerous expressions crossed his face. "Ronald," the sheriff said as he turned toward the chef. "Watch him." Ronald drew forth his shotgun. The sheriff wiped more of the sweat off of his

forehead as he moved along. He pulled his hat down and wiped his bald head, the scent of a thick, fungal yeast permeating through the air. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a number, his eyes focused on Caspar.

"Hello? Yeah. Listen, we have a problem here. It's a murder. I know. I know it should have been just a fucking breakfast, but... Look, wait...Come to...Hello...Hello?"

He thumped his phone across the palm of his hand, but the receiver's tone droned on, like hundreds of ants moving together. He kept saying 'hello' until he heard someone say, "You can hear me?" before the phone died. "No connection."

"T – Try the landline," the waitress suggest as she composed herself.

The sheriff grabbed the landline and dialed the number, only to realize that the line was out of service. He asked everyone to check their phones, but they found the service wasn't available.

"Something's wrong," the sheriff said as he looked at Caspar. "You did something, right? It's your fault, isn't it? You did some voodoo trick here and our phones aren't working."

"I didn't do anything, but I know who did it," Caspar replied with confidence. "Oh, yeah? Your imaginary friend?"

"I need you to trust me on this. I know who did this...who did all of this." The sheriff pointed his finger at him in order to get him to shut up. He walked

over the family and the corporate ma. "You need to go. Miss?" He turned to the waitress. "I think you should as well. Ronald . . ." His gaze clashed with the other man. "If you can stay with me until the authorities arrive, I'll be grateful."

"Don't worry, Falcon. I am here as long as you want me to be," he said, a crooked smile darting across his lips.

Ronald stood on alert beside Caspar, shoving the tip of his gun into his ribs every now and then. Falcon walked outside with the scared customers. The waitress, cradling her swollen belly, exited the establishment without another thought. The family hopped into a big van. Falcon requested that they take the waitress with them, which they readily agreed to. The corporate man huddled in his car nearby and

promised to tell the authorities once he reached the city. He waved at them as they turned the ignition key. To their surprise, the cars weren't working, either.

Falcon rushed toward the van and asked, "What happened? Why is it not working?"

"Some engine problem, I think," the father replied.

Falcon had him pop the hood open to check the engine, but to the best of his knowledge, the engine was perfectly stable. He didn't know what was going on. The corporate employee's answer was the same. His car wouldn't start, either. He quietly assured them he'd do something about it.

Across the horizon, the earth rose. Caspar and Ronald forgot about the gun. Everyone stared at the enormity of the situation. A still deathliness surrounded the entire desert.

Caspar had forgotten about it. These sandstorms came often in the deserts; frequent visits which weren't friendly at all. They wipe everything out in the open. If you are out and are not strong enough to bear it, you are dead. Falcon immediately seized the teenaged girl and gently pushed her toward the diner. Everyone started to come to their senses as the imminent threat became apparent.

"Run! To the diner!" Falcon shouted. "B – But, why now?" someone cried. "We will be safe inside. Come fast!"

Pulling everyone inside, Falcon and the others watched as the mammoth sandstorm hurtled toward them.

Te nsion

The last thing he wanted to meet was a burly, orange-haired boy with freckles all over his face, large and ominous eyes, wearing thick spectacles that he kept pushing back across the bridge of his nose in nervousness. He never wanted such a character within his mansion, but there he was. Apparently, he was Ivy Demetrius' best friend.

"Hello," the boy greeted.

Caspar mumbled to himself and ignored the newcomer. He was tired and leaned heavily upon his cane.

Balthazar appeared out of thin air and shouted, "Eureka! Oberon is ready to tell us. He said he will say what needs to be said in front of you. We were all waiting. Let's go!"

"Who is he?" Caspar inquired pointed at the guy as he fidgeted nervously. "His name is Fibonacci. He's also known as Fib. He is...um...He is Ivy's

friend."

Argh! Caspar growled inwardly.

He stalked away toward his room. He reached for the door to find Ivy, Death, and Oberon with a cunning smile spreading across his face waiting for him.

"Well there's our party boy. You did it. You freed me and are granted a wish in return," he said.

"Where is the Prophet?" Caspar asked.

"Oh, you want it straight away then. I thought we would talk for some time, until both of us grew tired."

Caspar’s eyes narrowed. He snapped at the fairy with impatience, “Where is the damn Prophet, Oberon? I don’t care if you are the King of Fairies, but know one thing, I am good at flogging and no matter what, I shall flog your ass if the next thing that comes out of your mouth isn’t the location of the Prophet.”

The fairy chuckled. “Very well. East Valley High School,” he said. Balthazar frowned and scratched his head. “In a school?”

“What else would East Valley High School be? An opera house!” Oberon grated. “Prophets aren’t what you think they’d be. They’re not old, poor, and living in Jerusalem. That’s not how they are. That’s a wrong picture of them in general. In reality, prophets tend to live a regular life. They do not know their own potential until someone comes up to them and reveals it. They are the oracles of truth and knowledge.

“The only problem is, they have this wall within their minds which keeps them from going insane. Because they have so much stored in that little brain of theirs, the wall allows by a fraction of their potential to permeate within them. That’s just an FYI. What really matters is that prophets live the life of a human. The only difference is they can see things a human is not able to.”

“So if we try to break the wall, would it give us the desired information we seek?” Ivy asked.

Oberon nodded, gently tapping his cane across the floor. “Absolutely. Though, everything comes with a price. That’s what Death says to everyone, poor Death.” He winked at the glossy-haired emo boy. “You see, information can cast a shadow of limitations. If you break the wall, you may kill the Prophet and believe me, that’s worse than raising Lucifer.”

“Why?”

“Well, prophets aren’t born so easily. They are made. They are engineered by angels to keep a source of information on Earth. The Prophet is given every biological organism suitable for his job. They work hard to build a prophet. You don’t want to mess with the angels’ creation, do you? Killing a prophet can lead to the destruction of valuable information. The future the Prophet knows and perceives will become invisible if you kill him. You have to be careful. Why do you think an angel hovers near a prophet at all times? They offer him or her safety and protection. Don’t try to scratch the wall, Mr. Socrates. If you do, you will end up fighting a civil war and that’s not what you want right now.”

Caspar agreed. “Very well. Where is this East Valley High School?” “In America,” the fairy exclaimed. “Carthage.”

“That’s a bit far from London, don’t you think?” Balthazar said. “And why are the most important people in the most obvious locations?”

“Because people never look at the most obvious places,” Caspar replied before Oberon said a word.

A sly smile danced about Oberon’s lips as he walked around. “Now, I suppose you are happy with what you’ve been given. I have done my part, according to our little deal and I hope we never have a deal like this again. I hope you abolish Lucifer’s plan to wipe out the civilization, but then, I really don’t give a damn, do I?” As he prepared to depart, Caspar stopped him. “Now what, kid? You are testing my patience. Fairies always lack patience.”

“I need to ask another question.” “All right. What do you want now?”

“How does someone acquire an Achilles’ heel without having been dipped into the River Styx?” Caspar glared at Death. Embarrassment coated his features as he

buried his face within his hands. “You are a fairy. You shove your nose in uncertain places. Places you don’t belong to and you overhear things. I think you’d know this answer as well.”

“What is an Achilles’ heel, Mr. Socrates?” Oberon countered. “Before I answer this question of yours, I need to know if you know what it is. We are not talking about the nonchalant Greek hero, Achilles, who wound up in the bosom of a dryad, either. That’s not an Achilles’ heel.

“An Achilles’ heel is invulnerable, indestructible, powerful, mighty, and strong, with only one tiny spot allocated for its weakness. If that spot is hurt or broken or stabbed, you will lose all your power. Achilles had that spot on his heel. That spot is the only thing that makes you weak. But I should tell you one thing, Achilles didn’t acquire this power from River Styx. Oh, no, he didn’t. He acquired it himself. He acquired it by learning, by fighting, by practicing, by concentrating to let all of his weakness accumulate on one spot in the most uncertain of places.

“Getting an Achilles’ heel by taking a dip in any river is just a false interpretation that has been recited so many times that it’s become a gospel truth. In truth, you acquire the heel yourself and not because of some river. It’s achieved through your soul, your spirit, and your anger. Everyone has an Achilles’ heel within them. You just need to know how to open it.”

“Th – Th – Thank y . . .” He was having a hard time saying a word he not accustomed to say. He kept his head down and said, “T – Thank y – you!”

> “My pleasure,” Oberon replied. “Farewell, my lads!” With that, he vanished. Caspar approached Death as if getting ready to strike. His anger increased

with such hatred and irritation that he found he couldn’t control himself. “When were you going to tell me about this Achilles’ heel?”

He'd understood the King of Fairies' explanation. Everyone had an Achilles' heel within them. He'd activated his, somehow. Perhaps he'd done so during the time he was locked within the cell of his own heart. The question was, where was the heel located? Where was the spot that made him weak? Was it his heel just like Achilles, or was it perhaps on his calf or his knee? Truth be told, none of it mattered. What mattered was that Death had never told him about it and he felt a tad betrayed because of it.

"I thought you knew," Death responded meekly.

"What's going on?" Ivy inquired as she glanced between them. Fib pulled the door open and carefully peeked inside.

"Death knew something about me. He knew I bore an Achilles' heel. That's the reason he made me his fixer, his executioner, because I cannot be killed. I never could be. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you knew."

"All this time, I thought I had some potential in me. I thought I was an ordinary boy doing some extraordinary things all this time. I had a power, greater than a warrior, within me."

"You earned it yourself. You heard Oberon. You were never dipped in the River Styx. You earned it by practicing with your soul. You earned respect, the same respect Achilles once had. You were an ordinary human doing extraordinary things."

Caspar waved his hand about. "Bah! Don't try to do reverse psychology on me. I know you know secrets about me, more than you are supposed to know."

"You should be upfront with us, at this point," Balthazar said as he raised his hand. "There's something we need to get straight. How did Caspar know Manfred?"

“Yeah, I remember Manfred saying something about there being some sort of history between them. What history was that?” Ivy prodded. “Is it because of Manfred that you’re like this?”

It’s history, Caspar. History is repeating itself. I won, you lost. Our story – it’s just repeating. It’s just coming to an end and going back to the beginning. Our story hasn’t changed.

Flashes of memories tumbled through Balthazar’s mind. “You lost before, to Manfred? He won. Something happened between you and him. You have a story between you two, mate. What is that story? If you think Death betrayed you by not telling you about your Achilles’ heel, you would be betraying us by not telling us about that mysterious angle between you and Manfred?

“When he died, you were so sure that he wouldn’t die. It was as if you knew him and the depths of his heart, as if he was very close to you. Yet you wanted to kill him. You had a deep hatred for him, for what he had done to you in the past and that’s why you pierced the blade with him even though you were so sure he wouldn’t die.”

Caspar felt as if everyone was cornering him. Their words and subtle accusations disturbed him. They wanted answers to their questions and so did he. Yet he wasn’t sure as to what he could tell them in order to calm their worries.

Death didn’t say a word. He never had feelings, but while spending time with Caspar he had come to have some emotions toward the boy. Emotions he didn’t like. He was death. He was cold. He wasn’t warm. Yet, warm emotions flooded within him, like torrents of a turbulent river.

“I think we have to get to the Prophet before Lucifer does. We’ll go through the portal tomorrow. Death . . .” he murmured as he turned toward him. “We need some assistance.”

“My powers are getting weak. After Lucifer’s arrival, the order has been shaken and so have I. I won’t be able to create a portal for you.”

“I – I can,” a voice said as a hand appeared. An entire face full of red spots and oiled, lanky hair materialized. “I – I mean, I am a wizard. I know how to open one.”

“It’s better to hire a professional, high class warlock than a wizard, who stammers like a girl,” Caspar snapped.

Ivy’s gaze wavered. “How dare you speak to my friend like that, Caspar? If you are angry, hit your pillow, but don’t try to take it out on my friends!”

Caspar rolled his eyes in irritation. Balthazar unfolded his wings, trying to neutralize the effect of the harsh wind coming from the open window.

“All right,” he said and tried to compose himself. His frustration, his awkwardness, his guilt shrugged off his shoulders. “Tomorrow morning, why don’t you try to create a portal? If you are successful in doing so, I will wrap a teddy bear for you and give it to you.”

“Oh, please, don’t be so sarcastic!” Ivy grunted.

Caspar glared at her. He marched past Ivy, never looking twice at anyone, except Balthazar, who purposely waved to follow him back.

“He’s calling me, so you know...Hmmm,” Balthazar spoke with hesitation and hurried after him.

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Ivy was with Fib in the guest room, trying to see if he knew how to really work a teleportation pentacle, while Death had left to take care of some other work.

Caspar was ensconced in the shower and Balthazar sat close to the study table. His eyes fell upon the pocket diary Caspar always used to carry in his satchel.

He never used to open it in front of anyone and Balthazar wasn't even sure he used it. His lips dried as he opened it. He was wrong about Caspar's hardly having used the journal. Scribbles in cursive handwriting that weren't really understandable, were written across the pages. Confused and dramatic writing littered the parchment, as if an artist was trying to put his thoughts into the book itself.

Pictures of various sigils and pentacles with large diagrams, drawings, etc. were in it. Balthazar, with one eye closed, held a cigar in one hand. With his other hand, he flipped through the pages only to find that it wasn't Caspar's personal diary. He'd hoped it would enlighten him to his connection with Manfred's connection in order to quench his curiousness, but it was showing so much more.

Demons hadn't originated from hell and Lucifer wasn't the one who created them. Not really. He was the one who made them, fashioned them, and gave them brains, but the Old Demons, according to the diary, were from a different dimension, period, and planet altogether. The maker's name wasn't written, but Balthazar's swanky knowledge determined that demons existed only in Hell and Earth now seemed rather shallow. It held more secrets. Demons were from different times and planets.

What really intrigued the gargoyle was how meticulous the information was displayed upon the soft, rectangular shaped paper. He flipped through more of the pages, engrossed in what he was reading. His claws enveloped the corners of the paper, almost tearing the diary apart.

He took note of the same procedure to open a portal through time and space, the one Caspar had shown him few days prior. That time, thing had seemed boring.

He was a gargoyle and indulging himself with the knowledge of that ungodly magic was mere stupidity. Now, the way he perceived things about sorcery vices came back to him and it didn't look as frail as it looked before. Somehow, it now made sense.

Why would Caspar want to learn about a pentacle which opens through time and space? Would it help him? He was a tad confused on that matter and tried to shake off the turmoil he was feeling. The procedure wasn't as complex as the one Caspar had shown him. This one was simple, just a tether of magic here and there and poof! The portal would open, casting colors and humdrums and whistling all over with ferocity and every melody imaginable.

Caspar was trying to minimize the time taken to open a portal, it seemed. The process written in the diary took about two minutes. TWO MINUTES. It was written with such a hard scribble that Balthazar could clearly make it out.

Perhaps it wasn't really preferable to Caspar. He seemed angry. The writing showed his exasperation. He'd tried another process and it worked in one minute. It was reliable, but complex. He was working on a process that could open a portal, in less than one minute so that he could do it in the blink of an eye.

A Long Gentleman

East Valley High School was an academy located in a red bricked building, hoisting a flag above it, which had different colors and symbols signifying the morals and ethics the school followed. The school had a way with the parents. One visit and they fell in love with it, making them want their sons and daughters to study there.

In the midst of thousands of students was a tall girl with a long face, curved lips, thin knit brows, and hair slowly falling down that was now was tied into a ponytail. She had mascara on her eyelids and fair skin that made every boy at the academy falling for her. There were crushes and likes for her. Quite a few would display such stalking affection toward her by posting irregular, irritating messages on Facebook and Twitter.

Vivian Elijah was admired by many, but at the same time was hated by some people. This was mainly by her classmates, girls who'd formed a group against her, humiliating her, and publicly harassing her. In the dorms, she would sometimes feel neglected and alienated.

The harassment continued. Perhaps it was her great beauty that the other girls envied. She was now certain that it didn't matter to her, as she had her own group to take care. They liked her just the way she was, beautiful and perfect. She was popular and participated in programs that could increase the remarkableness of the academy.

One day, she was given a duty to assess freshmen and to show them around school in a huddle. It was then that she'd met a boy named Samuel amongst them whose eyes instantly found hers and he kept looking her from that moment on. Though there were many times that guys looked at her, sometimes even following

her, this time was different. Samuel's look was honest, filled with passion, sincerity, and longing.

She took her time in showing the group around school to the cafeteria, playground, amphitheatre, dorms, common hall, and the curricular hall. At the very end of the trip, Samuel came up to her saying, "I love you."

That was uncalled for. Vivian had no idea how to reply. 'I love you' were three big words, difficult to speak and hard to respond to. People say it to get laid. Others say it to feel better. Yet with Samuel, it was something completely different. The way he said, he meant every word. They were full of depth and feeling.

"I know you don't know me and I don't know you, but I don't care," Samuel began, trying to give a justification to his statement as he stood in front of the group. Everyone was dumbstruck by his sudden nonchalance. "I love you. When I first saw you, I couldn't keep my eyes off of you and I knew that very second I was meant to be with you. Maybe I am an idiot. No, wait, I am an idiot!" he laughed. "But I don't care. I am idiot for you. I can be anything you want. At least, for once, just go on a date with me and see what kind of person I am."

Like in movies, people would say, "Say yes, girl," or "Go for it. Give the sweet kid a chance." But this was no movie and no one did care, though they were amused by it. They watched and waited for what would be the girl's reply on the matter at hand.

"I am sorry, but I don't know you."

Samuel felt awkward after that and stood at the back of the line. He was the subject of soft giggles and chuckles from all the boys and girls. Though they never said a word, their laughter spoke more than words could say.

Later on, Vivian would see Samuel, alone in his own small world, scribbling within his diary and then looking at the sky during his lunch break. She wanted to know what thoughts he was penning in his diary.

She found it cute. No one had ever said ‘I love you’ to her, even though she had been in many past relationships. Expressing his love on the first day was flattering. Samuel wasn’t a stalker, nor was he that desperate to have her.

Vivian found him later on in the garden sitting under a tree. She came up to him and said, “I am sorry about the first day.”

Samuel blushed. He was stunned. Her admission had taken him completely by surprise. He had no idea what to say, so he kept shut his mouth and waited.

“Are you that crazy that you said something on the first day which guys usually say after two years or so?” she asked.

“You...you are Vivian, right?” He sighed softly. “Do you believe in destiny, Vivian? Because I do. I have seen and have been with many girls, but none of them appealed to me until I saw you. I didn’t know what your nature was like or how your mind worked. I didn’t even look at your face, but in that instant, I just knew that you were the One.

“You know, the One who is chosen for me, by destiny, by fate. I know you are that One. I just know. Don’t ask me how or why, because I can’t answer those questions. For all I know, you are the One and if you didn’t think that as well, you wouldn’t be here saying you’re sorry. Somehow, you must have felt it, to.”

For some inexplicable reason, Samuel was right. She did feel it. A rushing current she couldn’t suppress coursed through her and she now knew what she had to do.

“You want to go on that date, then?”

Samuel smiled. His smile didn’t look cheap or cunningly spontaneous. It was sweet and nice, as if multiple drums were being played inside his heart.

They went on a date later that evening. At night, students weren’t allowed to go out, so they made do of the evening in a dim café where low parasols over the tables shadowed the faces of the visitors. Vivian confided everything about herself to Samuel and he, in turn, did the same.

She was born in Aberdeen. Afterwards, she’d moved to Carthage, where she’d spent most of her life. She was a top notch student in every subject. Upon hearing that, Samuel said he was just the opposite. All his life, he was a jerk and a loser, who would stalk girls whenever he had the chance to. Until one night, everything changed. He’d seen a girl being raped in an alley in downtown New York City. To protect her, he’d fought the rapist and rescued her.

Though, he was injured by multiple blows of fists and kicks, the police arrived on time. He was delivered to the hospital and stayed there until he’d recuperated. It was a life changing event. He’d realized what he’d been doing all that time and vowed he’d be a better person in the future.

Talking about likes and dislikes, Samuel and Vivian were quite engrossed with another. Soon, they knew everything about each other. As the evening dwindled and the night rolled in, the beautiful starlight shone above in conjunction to the crescent of the moon. They returned to their hostels and snuck in secretly. The warden of the girl’s dorm, with her harsh torchlight blazing, checked to see if everyone was in their place.

Vivian expected a kiss to be planted upon her lips before going him, but there wasn’t one. Samuel looked at her and smiled, the very incarnation of cuteness. She wasn’t sure as to why he was smiling, but decided to take the chance to see what

happened next. She curled a strand of her golden hair about her finger in hopes of giving him the indication that she was ready for a kiss. “Soooo . . .” she said, extending the syllable so he understood what she meant.

He came close, his hands clasping her hands. They were silky and gentle. He rubbed them against her palms. A tingling sensation crept into her heart. She saw his smooth, curved lips coming toward her, parting slowly and making their way down to her lip. Yet he soon stopped himself.

Her eyes opened to see his lips hovering inches apart from hers. The intense look he gave her was slightly unsettling. Instead of kissing her, he rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. His every breath sounded like a sigh and made her wonder as to what would happen if he tried to put his lips on hers. To her surprise, he didn’t. With a smile on his face, he let go of her hands. His brown hair fell down onto his forehead and zigzagged across his neck. He didn’t kiss her that night.

The next morning, she stormed up to him and said, “Why didn’t you kiss me?” She was obviously offended.

“What?” he sputtered.

“You were going to do so, but you didn’t, why?” She sounded like a nagging housewife. “Am I not perfect? My lips aren’t good? Do I have a bad breath?” She coughed to see if the last thing was true.

“Everything about you is perfect, Vivian. That’s the reason I didn’t kiss you. I wanted our first kiss to be perfect, like you. I wanted to see if our being close to each other for five minutes or so, without letting our lips touch, if it would help me to decide whether this is love. I knew, then, it was. On both our parts, but you didn’t kiss me, either. You waited and that was perfect. Come here.”

She frowned as she sat next to him upon the grass. “I have no idea what you

mean.”

“Me too, but that’s what love is, right? When you love a person, you have no idea what he or she means. You just know that the person is saying the right thing to you.”

She wrapped her arms about her chest as if she were a small, petulant child. “When are you going to kiss me?”

Samuel reached out and traced the line of her jaw slowly with his fingertips. He leaned forward and planted a small peck upon her upper lip. Their eyes met as he stepped back. A current passed through their bodies. He brought his lips against hers once more, yet this time, it wasn’t just a peck.

Vivian wasn’t taken by surprise. Her hands clutched at his t-shirt as Samuel’s fingers threaded through her ponytail. Their lips locked. The hot breath, the cool sensation, the galloping of their heartbeats – Vivian could feel it all in every ounce of her body. She knew the moment was perfect, as was the kiss was perfect. The tips of their tongues encircled one another’s as passion flared. Eyelashes fluttered and lips rhythmically allowed the trickle of pleasure into their chests. The emotions overcame them as the heat flowed through their veins.

“Uh huh!” someone coughed.

Their lips parted as they were interrupted. Samuel blushed. Vivian rubbed her fingers against her lips. She could still taste him. Her friend, Ariel, hovered nearby as she giggled and at the same time managed to speak.

“I am sorry to disturb you, but this is public. The teachers don’t really like it.” “We’ll take that into consideration,” Samuel said.

“Thank you.” Ariel giggled as she walked away.

Vivian looked at Samuel and smiled. “That was perfect.” Samuel patted her hair to comfort her.

“And you know what the funny thing in this is?” “What?”

“I just understood what you said to me,” she quipped and they both laughed.

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Public displays of affection carried out between Vivian and Samuel were now seen everywhere in East Valley. Many saw them kissing in shadowy corners, or cuddling on the school bench. They’d sneak out at the first opportunity. It was adventurous. Vivian’s life was turned upside-down after Samuel’s appearance and she now found a new meaning in everything.

It was perhaps around Tuesday when her life took a different turn. The school was empty except for Vivian and the faculty members, who were currently having a meeting in a closed room.

She saw a boy, tall and lean with curly hair and eyes hidden behind black rimmed spectacles, which looked geeky as his stubborn expression. His face was long and angular with a beaky nose protruding out of the skull. He wore a long trench coat that reached almost to his knee with low pants, hiking boots, and an uneven muffler, hanging about his neck. He clutched a cane, the knob of which was in the shape of a S.

He looked both odd and unique. Perhaps it was because of his eccentric dressing style, the whimsy smile, and startling gaze. His talking to himself lent an air of peculiarity about him as if he was talking to some invisible person beside him.

Vivian had an urge to talk to him. He looked vividly out of place, like an outlaw or an alien. She wanted to follow him, to stalk him and ask him who he is. All the while, her thoughts drifted as she saw the way he walked around aimlessly, holding a parchment in his hand as he mumbled to himself.

"Need any help?" she asked as she approached the boy.

Although she was dressed in her uniform, it didn't look like a uniform. Her shirt was disheveled with buttons opened from the top, long sleeves pulled up at her elbows, and her skirt now hung above her knees, casually displaying her upper thighs. Loose strands of her hair fell on her forehead, which she swept back as she spoke to him.

"I am trying to find Vivian Elijah," he said, glancing up at her before turning his attention back to the parchment he was holding.

"Yes. How can I assist you?"

"By saving the world from eternal damnation." He looked up once more, a sharp glint shining with his golden as eyes as he assessed her from head to toe. He tossed the parchment aside and grabbed a corner of her white shirt. "Come with me!"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she balked as she resisted. Caspar's grip was strong, however, and he dragged her toward the staircase with ease.

"Caspar Socrates," he replied. "That answers your question, am I right? So now come with me."

"Why and where are you taking me?"

"I know exactly why he is taking you," a voice murmured in the distance. They turned to look behind them. With fire in his pale eyes and big, wide

wings unfurling, Samuel came forward.

“An angel!” Caspar muttered. “So you are the Dominion who is protecting the Prophet?” The angel looked like a normal teenage boy except for his wings and the color of his eyes. “Fascinating. I would have thought of an Archangel protection, but Dominions are ratty in nature.”

“I am no ordinary Dominion.”

“Bad luck, then,” Caspar mused with delight. “Because I am no ordinary human, either.”

The angel swept past Caspar with such speed and ferocity that it almost tripped him and caused him to fall down. His grip on the girl loosened and she ran, staggering on her feet, for she could feel someone was trying to stop her even though she could not see him or her.

Balthazar was holding on to the girl’s ponytail when he felt a cut slice across his rocky body. He fell down as his wings were clamped. The angel turned about to face Caspar as he came to his feet with his cane’s support.

“We are not the bad guys here. We are the good ones,” Caspar tried to explain. “What do you want, man?” His tone and vocabulary was evidently influenced by today’s generation. “I am here to protect her and I will do just that, even if you are the good ones.” Their eyes met before the angel glanced in Vivian’s direction.

“Ah, I do see a romantic angle here.” Caspar smiled and stood up straight. “If you weren’t so busy cuddling with your childish girlfriend, I would like to inform you that Lucifer has risen and is trying to immanantize the eschaton.”

The angel narrowed his eyes. For a sharp second, he believed Caspar, yet he knew he was an intruder. He was the one trying to take away his beloved Vivian just a minute ago. “I know that Lucifer has risen, but I am not sure what she has to do with it.”

“Lucifer wants her,” Caspar explained. “To obtain information on how to end the planet or something else, perhaps. I don’t know. What I do know is we need to find a haven and hide her before he or his minions come and take her away. So if your curiosity is successfully quenched with my explanation, I would like an apology from you.”

“Are you speaking the truth?” the angel asked.

“If you don’t believe me, would you prefer a lie? I would tell you this as well. We are in a fairy tale in which a rabbit monster is trying to sprinkle sulfuric acid around the rabbit town and we are the ones, the chosen ones, who could stop him. Would it satisfy? After all, it is the truth.”

“All right,” the angel said as his feet touched the floor.

He folded his wings folded, his pupils slowly turning back into brown eyes. He looked like a normal teenager, perfectly ordinary, with cheeks sucked in, hair messed up, and a jacket hanging over a t-shirt that read, ‘TRUTH LIES’. Denim jeans and shoes completed his ensemble. He wasn’t wearing the school’s uniform.

“You came here because you felt she was in danger. You were perhaps in your house trying to relax when you had to rush here to protect her. How were you aware of such things? It puzzles me. Is it some ping that breaks your sleep or some alarm or something?”

The angel called out to Vivian. She stepped forward carefully, unsure as to which of them she could trust. The one she found solace in was a freak with wings and white eyes. Yet he was determined to protect her. She remained at a distance from him, yearning for an embrace from him, a tight one.

“What is your name?” Caspar asked.

“Siphon,” he answered as he looked at Vivian. “I am sorry, but it’s not Samuel. It was just a name I came up with. I had to lie.”

Shock registered across her lovely features. “Why did you lie to me?”

“Because I am not what you think I am. I am not human like you. I am different.” Hurt spread across her face. “I am an angel. You are a prophet. An important person, one who needs to be protected. I was assigned this duty, to protect you, so I couldn’t reveal the real me to you. I am sorry, but that was how the things were supposed to be.”

“So all this time, you didn’t love me?” she asked and took a step toward him, a slight courage building within her chest. Although, it couldn’t be called courage, since the emotion welling within her was more like anger. “You said things that made me fall for you, things I was never ready to hear from a stranger like you. You manipulated me. I loved you Sam – Siphon or whatever your name is. I started loving you!”

“It was a duty. Initially, it was an assignment every angel has to perform. I swear to you, I fell for you slowly. I learned that I love you as much – no wait, I love you more than you love me and if I ever get a chance, I would rip out my wings so that I can be with you as a mortal in this world.”

“I can’t trust you, but . . .”

“Oh, please, stop your melodramatic rant, you love crows! Balthazar!” Caspar growled. He turned to face the gargoyle that was now visible and was watching the conversation between two lovers. “Look at them. Love can make fools of wise people. Please, my ears will start bleeding if you don’t stop.” He frowned and rolled his eyes.

The corridor was free of people as the faculty and the students were busy in the auditorium where a school play was taking place, enacting scenes from Hamlet. Balthazar caught sight of a long figure in a silky gray suit standing near the doors, with two men beside him.

"That's Longhorn Darcy!" Vivian exclaimed.

"Not anymore," Caspar whispered, his voice barely audible.

"Oh, how embarrassing! I see familiar faces and I blush," Lucifer replied, a fake smile plastered across his face. "Well, I hate to kill you all, friends."

Siphon kept his wings folded. Vivian didn't care what kind of creature he was as she hugged him to her. Caspar and Balthazar shouted in unison. Caspar rolled a smoke bomb across the hallway which exploded into green smoke. The cloud gave them a means of escape and they ran downstairs toward the portal where the others were waiting for them.

Lucifer clapped his hands and a quick burst of wind crept through the corridor to clear the smoke. He walked briskly; his face calm and composed. He made his way downstairs. At the far end of the corridor, Ivy stood with a cigarette between her lips. Caspar was puzzled, but didn't say a word. The devil was chasing them and they needed to leave as soon as possible.

The group hurried toward the Nephilim and she led them from there. Fib stood in the washroom and waited near the portal. Ivy threw away the cigarette and urged Siphon and Vivian to go into the washroom. Caspar stood outside with his cane, ready to deflect an attack from the devil.

Vivian had no idea as to what was going on, though she just trusted Fib. She tried to take a leap of faith, but her legs seemed as if they were cemented to the floor. Siphon grabbed her hands and smiled as he tugged upon her hands and led her inside.

Her eyes were closed as she held on to his hands for support. She wasn't sure as to what was going to happen further, because she was stuck in the present.

Caspar acknowledged Ivy's signal to go inside the washroom, so that they could go back. He heard Lucifer's voice thunder throughout the corridor.

"You think you won, Mr. Socrates? And that I lost?" he asked as the two demons stood beside him, waiting for further instructions.

"I don't think. I know," Caspar responded.

Ivy was dumbstruck by Lucifer's sudden appearance. Caspar eyed her from the corner of his eyes. She was debating whether to attack the devil or to just play it cool. Though he couldn't gauge her emotions, he could read her facial expressions clearly.

"Don't worry. I am coming fast for you and the Prophet, Mr. Socrates. I will surely come. And when I do, you will regret it because I don't lose. People like to think I do, but I don't. I like to cherish the look of surprise on the person's face. I am waiting for that look to cross your face and I know for sure that you will have it someday soon," he gloated.

Caspar smiled. "I am waiting for that day, but with a slight change – the look of shock and not just of surprise that will surely come from you."

With that said, he winked and hurried into the washroom with Ivy in tow. He looked behind him, expecting to see if the devil would step in, but he didn't. The washroom door was vacant with no apparent shadows around it. They rushed toward the portal and stepped inside. Fib was the last to enter as he closed the portal behind him.

Or acle

The House of David was an ancient and sacred temple made and consecrated during the reign of King Solomon. It was said he used many djinns and angels as workers to build it so it could be furnished and developed in such a manner that no demon, not even Lucifer, would be able to enter until given permission to do so.

Over a period of time, the House of David's location had been shifted from Jerusalem to Egypt to Rome to London and finally to the U.S. The temple's appearance from outside was of a simple structure without any signs that pointed to something unusual or magical. It looked like a normal, perfect looking beach house with an open porch and well maintained glass windows.

While Caspar, Ivy, Fib, and Balthazar were out, Capernaum and Harvard were able to locate the House of David, which could be used as a useful safe house for now. They arrived at the beach house on a stormy night the same day the Prophet had been taken.

Caspar and Ivy walked along with Balthazar floating along beside Harvard. They tried to understand the grave explanation of how Harvard turned into Eros. Vivian and Siphon followed close behind them. The temple loomed in the distance, away from the bustling streets of the town where the river touched the seashore. Caspar recognized it as soon as he saw it. It was not bricked, but made of wood and its canopy shadowed the porch and the backyard.

"Why is the House of David useful to us?" Caspar inquired.

“Because no one can track us here. The demons have help from their sources and fairies to find what they need, but here, no fairy, demon, or person would be able to locate us.”

Caspar nodded. Vivian decided to stay outside with Siphon to talk about certain things once they reached the porch. He could feel the burden of responsibilities that had been put upon her shoulders so unexpectedly and understood her dilemma. She debated whether to be amongst complete strangers who are all weird or to be in her school to complete the rest of her education.

“The talk, it’s bad. The talk is always bad,” Ivy whispered.

“What was with the cigarette, Demetrius?” Caspar turned to face her. She looked dumbfounded because of the abrupt question. “As far as I know, you don’t smoke. You’ve always been a good Catholic girl in keeping away from such vices.”

He could see that she was trying to come up with a convincing lie. To her surprise, the truth spilled from her lips instead.

“I am anxious, Caspar. Everyone is. My own family –my own race, I mean, has lost hope. We’ve retrieved the Prophet, but do you really think you’ll be able to make her talk?”

“Who gave you the cigarette?”

“Baltha . . .” she stammered, her cheeks flushed with color.

“The gargoyle!” Caspar angrily stamped his cane. “That is preposterous!” “Listen, listen, umm . . .” She found his hand in the darkness and clutched it

hard. He showed no surprise at her doing so. Perhaps it was because he was now accustomed to her. “Why are you being so protective over me, eh?” She raised her brows in question. “Are you trying to be my silent guardian?” she asked, a small, coy smile played about her lips as she gazed back at him.

He pushed her against the wall, wrapping his hands around her neck bone. She gasped for breath as her heart thumped within her chest.

"I can be scary sometimes, Nephilim. Don't test me." "Kiss me, Caspar!" she taunted.

He stared down at her, his brows arched in wonder. "Kiss me."

"What?"

"I want you to kiss me, as hard and as passionately as you can. I don't care how hard it could be. I just want you to kiss me."

"May I know the reason?"

"I want my stress to be relieved. A kiss might just do the trick."

"This is absurd." Caspar pulled himself back. "We have work to do."

"Don't say you didn't have second's thoughts on kissing me. You did, right?" Caspar couldn't help but to smile. "You are crazy, you know that?"

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Siphon sat on the wooden staircase beside Vivian who wore a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. He tried to put his arm around her, but she shrugged it off because she was angry.

"I am sorry. I didn't know such disaster would strike."

"Did you mean it?" She didn't look at him as she was too afraid to do so. "What?" he asked.

"About the fact that you'll rip your wings off in order to be with me as a human."

“Of course,” he said. He could feel a glimmer of hope flaring within him. “See, I am sorry the way things went down. I wanted to tell you, but being an angel, I couldn’t. I had a duty that I didn’t do very well on. I am just a Dominion, a young Dominion. The duty I had to perform wasn’t a duty anymore. It was more than that. I began to care for you and then I fell for you hard. The words, initially, might not have been true, but gradually every word which I said to you during the days we spent together was the only true words I said.”

“I am not the Prophet,” she murmured.

“You are. You aren’t getting any visions because you aren’t trying very hard. When you emphasize on a certain aspect, you get more than you bargain for. You are a bag of knowledge for both angels and demons.”

“That’s why Longhorn Darcy wanted me, isn’t it? But how can he be THE Devil?” Vivian remembered that during the trip to the House of David, Caspar had told them everything ranging from Manfred’s chaotic plan to Lucifer’s rise and the host he’d taken. “It’s just weird. He’s the second influential person in magazines and elsewhere.”

“The people...they need you.” He pointed at the door. “They are good. If you want to stay alive and be far away from all this, I understand, but help them before you go away for good.”

“How does it feel? To get these visions?”

“I have never been a prophet, but I will be the person who stands beside you to catch you when you fall and to hold and comfort you.”

Vivian’s eyes filled with tears. She wanted to hug him, but her body wouldn’t allow it. “What about my studies?”

“You are a prophet. One day, you have to leave everything behind so that angels can use you in their time of need.”

“Why are you saying things like this? I don’t want to be used or anything.” “That’s the destiny of a prophet, but I will be there with you. I’ll find some

way to resolve this. But for now you have to help them. You have to save the world. For all we know, the world depends on you right now,” he implored, much to her chagrin.

***

Vivian sat quietly on her chair in the blue lit room. Caspar and Capernaum stood within the doorway, looking strangely at the Prophet while Ivy, Harvard, Fib and Balthazar stood in a corner of the room. Siphon clasped her hand tightly as if he would never let it go.

Because he was a demon, Capernaum had to get a permission to enter the House of David from an angel or someone having angel blood. Ivy had to accept her invitation so he could achieve that purpose.

“The Prophet has some information. Lucifer wanted her for a purpose, to bring Doomsday on Earth. I think we could use her for our own purposes, however. We can ask her the way to stop Lucifer, once and for all,” Capernaum said.

“Would she be able to give us such information? For last few hours, she had no idea that she was the oracle.”

“She would be. Her head will ache a bit, but that’s the price she has to pay.” Caspar grew angry. What kind of price? She was a poor girl, oblivious to such

things going around her. She didn’t want this. She wanted to stay in school and enjoy

her teenage life. To flirt with boys and go on dates – that was what a girl of her age would do. He could never achieve a normal life, but he wanted her to have it. He knew it was impossible, but a little wishful thinking never hurt anyone.

He felt bad for Vivian and wanted to make things right, but everything was out of his hands. Angels wouldn't let her live her life the way she wanted to live it because for them she was a powerful being. Yet she was still a pawn in the scheme of things, a player that could be useful to them in the battle between Heaven and Hell. Previously, Caspar wouldn't have given a damn, but with the recent change within him, he felt bad for her.

He sat down opposite to her, staring at her intently. "Are you ready?" he asked

softly.

"Yes," she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

"Good. Now, you have to think about how to stop Lucifer. Think about the weapons used during the Great War between Michael and Lucifer through which Michael was able to trap him in Purgatory in order to defeat him. I need to know how he did it. We all need to know everything."

She nervously chewed upon her lower lip. "I don't know what to do."

"Just . . ." He tapped his forehead. "Think. Think and you shall see what we seek. Just picture yourself there and think carefully as you ask the question of how to defeat Lucifer."

He watched as she closed her eyes. For a moment, nothing happened. She was trying hard to suppress all of her problems. Her lips quivered and sweat broke out across her forehead. Her concentration proved to be difficult. Judging by the look upon her face, he could see that she wasn't able to focus what they needed to know.

“See, Vivian,” he urged softly. “You see, you can only remember when you want to see it. If you can’t remember, you can’t know what you are trying to know. You have to keep that little question as a beacon and think deeply about it. Think outside of the world, but not away from the question.”

“But it’s difficult! My mind is not able to handle all of this.”

“It will, if you try.” Caspar tapped his forehead again. “Try hard. Close your eyes and just let your subconscious flow.”

She nodded weakly. Slowly, her eyes closed. Nothing happened. Her face was devoid of her inner struggle. Yet the longer she concentrated, the more her struggle increased. Soon, it was as if she was having a seizure. Her head started to shake, as did her entire body. Siphon tried to grab her, but she was too rigid and jittery.

He fell back in shock. The seizure she was suffering from ended and her hair fell across her face. Drool dripped from her mouth and her pupils were now white. Her arms and legs were completely loose as if she had no bones in them. She didn’t move at all.

“Will you answer our questions?” Caspar asked.

“Yes.” The voice wasn’t that of an innocent girl, but rather a husky one. “I

will.”

“Good. How can we defeat the Morningstar?”

“With Michael’s Sword,” she said. Her lips weren’t visible as they were hidden beneath her thick hair. “The Holy Sword.”

“All right. Will we be able to wield it?” Capernaum inquired. ‘Sorry,’ he mouthed to Caspar. “I have heard that only Michael has the power to wield it.”

“No. The Archangel Michael was the only one who has the permission to wield it, but after the Great War, his powers were reduced. He will be unable to wield it as he has gone weak and old.”

“Any alternatives?”

“The descendant of Solomon,” the Prophet said. “Michael gave Solomon certain powers. If emergencies strike, he shall be the one who will fight the War with the sword, but none such emergencies came through his time. Though, the gift of Michael courses through his bloodline.”

“Where can we find the descendant of Solomon?”

“In Kansas. A girl named Hope Moretz is the one you are seeking.”

“Is there anything else which can help us?” Caspar prodded. His chest was growing heavy with every possibility that rose. He felt that they were only few steps away from their victory, from their goal. “To find the sword,”

“Find
Metatron,”
“Why?”

“He knows where the sword is.”

“And the frigging Prophet doesn’t?” Balthazar squeaked loudly, the sound of his voice reverberating throughout the entire room. “Oops, sorry.”

“Some things, they are forbidden to know. Prophets don’t have unlimited knowledge, but they have enough to create a dent in the universe,” Caspar explained through clenched teeth. He turned to face Vivian. “Thank you.”

Her back straightened up and she swept her hair back. Her pupils returned to their normal color and her once pale face was now a tad brownish in color. She found life in herself again. A searing pain rent through her head, straining her badly.

“Ah,” she cried and massaged her temples. “This is worse than I thought.”

“Do you remember what you said?” “A bit. Just tiny glimpses, though.”

“Good. The Wall isn’t broken, then,” he whispered as he turned to face his team. Luckily, his words fell on deaf ears.

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Vivian spent some time with Siphon in the other room trying to recall certain events. He told her to be calm and that she’d done a good job in telling them what they needed to know. Truth be told, he was proud of how far she’d gotten in seeking the information.

Caspar stood in the adjacent room, his eyes shining brilliantly. He looked at his team with pride. “I understand about Solomon’s descendant. I read it somewhere in a book of angelology, but what about Metatron? Who is Metatron?”

“He was the one who recorded the Creation and committed it to writing,” a voice filtered from the back of the room. Siphon appeared. “The Father commanded him to keep a record about how He created Light and Day. Metatron scribbled everything down. He saw creation and what was done to achieve. He wrote it down on a scroll of parchment which is now referred to as the Scroll of Creation.”

“He’s an angel?” Ivy stepped forward as she asked the question. Siphon shivered. “An archangel.”

“I don’t understand. How will he know the location of Holy Sword?” Caspar asked.

“The point is, creation is still going on. Therefore, creation has advanced. This means that Metatron is writing about it. He has been writing about the creation since

the beginning of time. He saw and wrote as civilisations grew, battles were fought, and rivalries were decided as history was made. He also saw the Great War, because that was part of the creation that decided whether creation will end or rise again."

"Since he saw it all, he would know where Michael has kept the Sword after he grew ill because that's a vital thing in the creation as well."

Siphon nodded. "Exactly."

Caspar gazed about the room. "We need to form separate groups now. I need Balthazar and Ivy on my side. We three will go and find Hope Moretz, Solomon's descendant. Harvard, Capernaum, and Siphon will go to Metatron."

"Why me?" Siphon protested.

"You are an angel and Metatron is an archangel. Your kinds are familiar with each other. There has to be someone who can convince him into telling us about the Holy Sword. He will not fancy the presence of a demon and a werewolf alone," he looked at Harvard who rubbed his spectacles nervously and at Capernaum who remained emotionless.

"What about Vivian?" Siphon inquired

"Oh, oh. I forgot." He scanned the room once more as if remembering that he'd forgotten someone. "Ah, there you are! Fibonacci, a wizard in your early years, you will be here with her. You will be able to protect her, but then, this is House of David. No one can enter without permission, so do not worry. Will that be all right with you, Fib?"

Fib stepped forward and said meekly, "Yes, Caspar."

"Shall we begin?" Caspar inquired as he clapped his hands together.

Tw o Worlds

Caspar was packing his satchel and checking his cane as he prepared for the coming journey when someone knocked upon his door. Ivy promptly entered his room. She wasn't dressed in her battle gear. Perhaps it was because there was no war to attend to. She wore tight fitting jeans with combat boots fastened to her knees and a small waistcoat wrapped around her white, plain shirt as well as a pair of glares. Her hair was conveniently pulled back.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said, pushing her hands down into her jeans pockets as she moved closer to see what Caspar was putting within his satchel. Her eyes fell upon a red, small pocket diary.

Caspar caught her eyes. He instantly perceived her attraction to the diary. He snapped the bag shut and hung it across his chest.

"I never knew you wrote diaries, hotshot," she replied a slight smirk. "I always wanted one of those to write my feelings down on a piece of paper. I wish I had one like yours."

"What did I do?" Caspar was puzzled and, at the same time, bewildered. He was scared that she wouldn't persistently stick to the diary thing and keep asking about it like she had about his past. He had no idea as to what he had done, but if he had ever done anything, it wasn't intentional. "What could I have done now?" he prodded briskly and taunted her a little.

"You can't treat a person like this. You can't treat Fib like this. When he came here, he was excited that he would work with us and said that he can be of great

assistance. He proved that he was useful. He made a portal for us in time of need. He wants to go into the field and not babysit a prophet here."

"Bah!" Caspar spat arrogantly. "He's a wizard. Not even a warlock. We don't need amateurs on the field."

"Everyone is an amateur at some point of their life, Caspar. You were as well," Ivy said.

Caspar could see Ivy was angry. Earlier, she had told him that Fib was a close childhood friend of hers who had come here to meet her. He was a shy, awkward, teenager who learned he was a wizard a few years back and had no idea about dark magic. Caspar detested that fact and felt that Fib was useless. If he had been used at the time of the Prophet's rescue, what was the guarantee he could be useful later on? Though, he acknowledged that he shouldn't be so hard on the boy.

"He's not babysitting. He's here, protecting the Prophet."

"In the most secured place. You know as well as I do that the House of David is secured to the highest degree. You don't need anyone here to protect her, unless or until she commits suicide, but then, that's hardly a case. She'll never do that."

"I have given him a task to do. I hope he performs it well."

Caspar pretended to be ignorant of the situation. He was curious to see as to how Ivy would persuade him to let Fib go along on their mission.

"Do you fancy the nerd, Ivy? I have started to think it's a possibility," he mused.

"Of course not," she said, feeling a tad abashed. "I don't like him. I always thought of him as a brother and not in any other way."

"So why are you saying this to me?"

“Because he’s my friend and...umm...” A small smile played about her lips. She was hesitant, but at the same time, her eyes seemed desperate. “He fancies you, more than me. He adores you and he is a fan of yours. He likes you,” she admitted.

Caspar shook his head. “Ah, I see. People respect their idols, I suppose.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “He doesn’t think of you as an idol. Haven’t you gotten it

yet?”

“What are you trying to imply?” “I am saying he likes you.”

“Well, I have accepted the fact that over a period of time, people fancy my attitude and admire my endeavors,” he quipped.

“He LIKES you.” She emphasized the word ‘like’. “He somehow wants to be with you.”

“So you are saying...?”

“Yes, you got what I am trying to say.”

“No, no.” Caspar was having a hard time believing such a fact. “That is absurd. How do you know?”

“Oh, come on. Whenever he sees you, he blushes. He smiles and he giggles.” Realization dawned on Caspar. Perhaps Ivy was right. Perhaps Fib really liked

him, but that didn’t change the course of events.

“Thank you for telling. I think we should go now,” he suggested.

He didn’t want to think about it any more. A boy liking him? That had never happened to him before.

***

Siphon trudged across the trampled grass. A sunny morning had just risen and the blue skies were slightly cloudy. He looked at the clearing devoid of twigs and vines. Behind him, Capernaum and Harvard followed in their human forms.

It was difficult for the angel to exist between the two. This was such an unlikely group. He wasn't used to being around a demon and a werewolf, nor any other creature except his own race. The last thing he wanted to do was to trust a demon during a mission. Why was the demon helping them anyway? He didn't get the idea much, but he must have had a reason for doing all this. Was he angry with Lucifer or with his own race?

Siphon wore a brown jacket that fit him like a second skin. His t-shirt had a round neck and made his chest bulge out. He was scared about Vivian. He had never thought that he would fall for her. It should have been just a mission for him, but it slowly turned out to be more. He didn't regret his decision in falling in love with her; but he knew that the news of the affair would shake the very Heavens. Most of the angels, especially the ones who were jealous of him, would be trying to fill Raphael with nonsense that he was not the right person to work on any mission.

Raphael. The name itself caused shivers to run down his spine. His heart felt deep, bottomless, as if it were thrown down into a pit and sinking slowly in the water. Raphael was the commander of this mission, chosen for this century. Being an archangel, he chose the best angels for his team. He had been selected to protect the Prophet. The day he'd been told of his new mission, everyone looked sideways to see the chosen angel and had watched him with unblinking eyes, whispering to each other about the new course of events.

He'd felt as if he was on a high moon. His rivals made faces and turned their backs on him thinking, 'What a waste!' He hadn't cared. He was happy about the

prospect of the duty he'd been assigned to. But now, as he walked briskly under the canopies of the trees, keeping away from the sunlight, which hurt his tender skin, he could feel Raphael's wrath slowly descending. Raphael would be disappointed and that bothered him all the more. Raphael would be vindictive as well, which frightened him as he considered the notion. Raphael trusted him and he'd broken that trust.

He thought that he could hear the words coming from Raphael, "I should have chosen Isaiah or Raul. Why did I choose Siphon out of all?" He wasn't sure if those were true words, but it did mask his reality.

He looked up and down at the ground where the patchy grass was pressed again the wet mud. He had one thing in his mind. He'd chose to help Caspar Socrates, because he knew it was necessary. He also wanted to prove his abilities to Raphael. He didn't want this to happen. He wanted to prove that he was worthy to complete this job, but love is such an emotion that lingers on and cannot be forgotten.

Raphael, on other hand, was a person who detested such things, especially when it came to his duties. Perhaps someday, he would understand. Perhaps someday, Siphon could prove things to him so he might understand that love could not be tamed.

He knew Vivian's life was going to be a pathetic hell. Unfortunately, he could not do much about it. Caspar, the curly haired boy with the weird golden eyes, didn't care much about the outcome of her life because that's the way a prophet had to live. He considered his options, but nothing came to mind. He knew it was imperative that he save her.

Siphon soon caught sight of the house. It was more like a small cottage with a chimney at the top. Behind it was a row of willow trees. The pastures were beautifully

green. Flowers blossomed nearby and butterflies hummed. His angel ears could hear the beautiful sounds throughout the entire area.

He looked at Harvard who had a disheveled look with smoky glasses and mundane clothes on. He then observed Capernaum who seemed elegant but old in his crumpled human skin. The two possessed such different personalities and were creatures from different sides of the world, but they had gotten together to stop the same force, none-the-less.

“I am not sure as to what Metatron’s behavior toward us would be,” Siphon said. He gazed at Harvard. “He doesn’t like furry animals, no offense, and he certainly does not like demons.”

Capernaum stepped forward to get a better look at the cottage. All was silent and it seemed to be deprived of life this far from the city. For once, he wanted to stay here, free from all of his anxieties. He assessed Siphon. “He has to help us,” he replied. “Or else the blood of billions will be on his hands.”

“What is he doing here on Earth?” Harvard asked as he followed them closely. “According to some books, archangels weren’t really into humans and helped them only because their father told them to do so.”

“Metatron came to find solace here. It was said he found it easy to write about the creation while he was on Earth.” Siphon explained. “It’s so funny, because just few years back, I was an angel who knew everything and was doing his best in the class.”

Harvard giggled. “There’s a class up there?”

Capernaum failed to understand the joke spoken so freely. He stared at the cottage as they drew closer to it. “Siphon, you should knock on the door.”

Siphon approached and knocked upon it, thumping his light fist against the wooden door. No one replied. The door swung open, catching them by surprise. Metatron, the one who wrote the Scroll of Creation, stood in front of them dressed in a revealing a red Hawaiian shirt on which boats were displayed along with a pair of Bermuda shorts and sandy slippers. He held a glass within his hand, which he gulped down upon seeing the three unknown visitors.

“Are you from the pizza shop?” he asked nonchalantly and waited for them to make the next move.

***

“Where are you taking me, Dad?” the child asked.

His father didn’t reply. His hand clasped the child’s as he dragged down the corridor to his room. The dull silence made the child feel a tad queasy. His father closed the door behind him and promptly made his way toward the chest of drawers.

“I want you to have something. Something you will remember for a long time ahead,” he said. He pulled an item from the cabinet and handed it to the child.

With his small hands, the boy fiddled with the book, examining one cover to the other. It was rectangular, small, and bright red in color. “What is this?” he asked.

“This is a pocket diary, a personal one.”

The boy frowned. “What am I to do with this?”

“It helps you to write about your personal feelings. You can use to keep records of things you know will come handy in the future. I am giving you this, son, because this is important. Some day you will appreciate the beauty of this, but until that day comes, you have to promise me that you will keep this very carefully.”

“All right, Dad.”

Clearly, the child would have exchanged the diary for a cool action figure, but upon learning that this book was important to his father, he knew it was important for him to keep it with him. He embracing his father tightly and then pulled back.

His father slowly patted his head. “You are special, son. I don’t know how, but you are special. One day you will change the fate of the universe.” He paused. “You see, everything you know and have encountered will end. At that point in time, there will be a decision to make. A decision so vital and so important that it will change everything as you know it. That decision will be to choose whether you’ll be the one who ends things or the one who protects everything.”

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Caspar’s eyes opened. Ivy and Balthazar stared at him with a look of suspicion that he broke their gaze and looked upon the foggy morning. Ivy had gone to the local sheriff to ask about Hope Moretz or someone with a similar sounding name. The sheriff, who thought that Ivy was Hope’s old friend, searched the register and found a person bearing that name.

The trio made their way to the house that now stood before them which was aligned perfectly opposite to the one standing across from it. The houses were so similar it was as if they were twins. Caspar tentatively knocked on the door. It swung open and a man with a rugged beard on his face stared back at him and Ivy. Balthazar hovered nearby, invisible to the naked eye.

“We are Hope’s friends. Is she there?”

“Uh, yes, sure. Come in.” He welcomed them, albeit a tad apprehensively.

The house was unkempt, as if no woman lived there. The dishes were dirty and piled on to each other. The tap was on and the carpet was stained with signs of numerous kinds of food. The room also smelled of gasoline. Small puffs of dust burst into the air as they sat upon the sofa.

"Hope! Come down," her father ordered. "No!" she shot back.

"Your friends are here." "I don't have any friends." "Just come down."

No reply came. Her father tried to remain composed and smiled at them weakly. "I am sorry. She has kept to herself for the past couple of days."

"If she doesn't wish to come down, we'll go up there," Caspar replied. They made their way up the staircase and opened the door to her bedroom to find a dull room with posters hanging across the walls, the windows tattered and broken, a ceiling fan swishing about without making much of a difference, and the floor was littered with scores of books.

A girl sat upon her bed, talking to herself or someone that only she could see. When she realized that someone had entered her room, she stood and composed her face. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Caspar Socrates and this is Ivy Demetrius." Caspar brought his hand forward, but she didn't take it. He withdrew it and said, "We need to talk to you."

"Who are you people? Why are you here?"

Caspar surveyed their surroundings as she spoke, taking note that she was looking and talking to someone. "You were busy? Who were you talking to?"

“Are you from the psychiatric hospital? I told you, I am not crazy!” Her voice rose to almost shrieking tone. “I am not going to go with you people.”

“We aren’t from the...Wait a minute . . .” Caspar stared at a spot that sparkled beside her bed as if someone invisible was standing there. The sparkles moved slightly. “Who is that?” he asked and prepared his cane. “Identify yourself!”

The small lights wavered.

“How did you see it?” Hope asked with disbelief.

“Because I was looking for it,” Caspar said and keenly observed the slight glow, which didn’t move at all.

“I thought I was the only one who could see him.”

Caspar grimaced. “Well, you are clearly wrong on that.”

Ivy with a caring expression on her face, inquired, “Is that the reason you thought we were from a psychiatric hospital?”

“I wanted the people to believe me. No one would. My dad took me to so many doctors in hopes of finding a cure for my hallucinations. I went to doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists until I got fed up. I could take it no more. I started to believe I was insane, until you confirmed my belief. You saw it as well.” She looked at Caspar, who was still figuring out what the unknown entity was trying to do.

“What is this by the way?” Ivy asked.

“It’s a sort of apparition of a deceased, who is close to the person and that person is the only one who can see it in its full form. To others, it’s just sparkles, something they’ll see briefly from the corner of their eye. That’s the reason Hope can see the person clearly, but I can’t. I am just seeing fairy sparkles and glitters right now. Though, if you aren’t looking at it or emphasizing your mind to find the apparition, you will not be able to see it. The psychiatrists and Hope’s father didn’t

believe her and didn’t think for a second that she was saying the truth. I suspected it was an apparition when I saw talking to herself and so I trained my mind to it and saw it immediately.”

“Oh. I’m now also able to see it!” Ivy exclaimed with bewilderment. “If that’s an apparition of a deceased, Hope used to know, is it your some relative or cousin?”

“No, worse than that. I thought I was wrong, I thought it wasn’t true until he convinced me by telling me about those epic stories of his,” she said.

“Who is he then?”

Realization dawned upon Caspar and his heart drummed slowly. Hope parted her lips and said the words he wanted to hear.

“The wisest man that ever lived on the face of this Earth – King Solomon.”

***

Siphon hadn’t expected Metatron to look like a stylish, Hawaiian surf boarder with gray hair and striking sandy eyes. In his mind, he’d thought him to be a dull, bearded man looking like Leonardo Da Vinci wearing colorful robes and having a quill tucked into the curls of his hair which he used to write his scrolls, but that perception wasn’t right.

Metatron’s eyes grew cold as he stared at Capernaum. It was as if he knew Capernaum very well despite the fact that they’d just met. “A demon? And a werewolf with an angel...This is quite an unusual group you have.”

“We are here on an important matter, sir. We need to speak to you,” Siphon

said.

Although Metatron had a casual lifestyle, he had an air of importance about him. His face was expressionless and his voice was so hard that it almost jerked Siphon back.

“I don’t want a protozoon or even a big ball of fur inside my house. You can come in, though.” He nodded at Siphon.

Siphon entered, giving an assurance to the others as they remained outside and told them not to worry. He found himself in a warm place as he entered Metatron’s home. A laptop sat on a table beside the soft upon which a Word document was opened.

“What are you typing?” Siphon prodded.

“I am Metatron, young lad. I am recording the creation.”

His admission was unexpected. Siphon hadn’t considered the fact that the Scroll of Creation was actually being written on a laptop instead of a long, large scroll. He couldn’t understand that modernization not only reached mankind, but it had also reached angels and demons. He had seen many demons using cell phones, pagers, iPhone’s, iPad’s, etc. It was difficult to imagine and would sometimes cause him to burst into fits of laughter.

Metatron was serious. He had a long face, his nose bent slightly. He stood and said, “I don’t like the company you are keeping, young lad.”

“I am with them because I need them.”

He didn’t ask as to what was that need was, though he looked amused by Siphon’s facial expressions. Somehow, Siphon knew the vigorous emotions amazed Metatron, for they were only seen in a few angels. Angels never revealed what was building within them, even when they wore their skins. They always remained firm and plastic-like.

“What is your name?” Metatron inquired. “Siphon.”

“You are a...?” “A Dominion.”

“Dominions are such low class angels. What duty are you performing on Earth, young lad?”

“I have been sent on behalf of Archangel Raphael to protect the Prophet.” “Such errand given to such a small –” He didn’t complete the sentence and

gave Siphon a cold smile instead. “You might be talented. Raphael is ruthless and a pioneer. He wouldn’t choose a Dominion to do such work. Interesting. Tell me, why are you here?”

“You might have heard about the rise of Lucifer?” Metatron winced. “Say something new.”

Siphon tried to compose himself. Metatron was too fast, too sharp in replying and with the cold gaze he pinned on him, it was hard for him to bring the right words to his lips. His hands shook, so he dropped them into his jacket pockets and struggled to keep up with the conversation at hand.

“Uh...so...we need the Holy Sword to defeat Lucifer in order to kill him with

it.”

“You know, foolish boy, that Lucifer cannot be killed. Neither can we. He was an archangel. Archangels cannot be killed, not even by Michael’s sword.”

“But he can be injured, which means we can trap him. I have heard, you know, as stories about the Land of Souls have gone by. Michael opened the cage with the help of the sword, so if we have the sword, we could open the cage and throw him down there, this time leaving no loose ends to contend with.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “So you are saying that by getting the sword, you people would open the Purgatory and throw him in there? Who might wield the sword itself? Michael is too weak to even stand and Lucifer is powerful.”

“Solomon’s descendant is the one who can wield it.”

“Why are you here then if you have figured everything out?”

“We need the location of the Holy Sword,” Siphon said. “And only the Scroll of Creation holds that information.”

Metatron sighed. “The sword is hidden in a sacred place. A place which is impossible to get go to, let alone to even think about. Why would I want to give you that sort of information?”

“Because Earth is in danger.”

“So!” he exclaimed as his eyes blazed. “Lucifer is inevitable. He cannot lose, not this time. We don’t have Michael anymore. Michael was order. Lucifer was chaos. Order fights chaos. But now, we don’t have order. We just have chaos. It’s better to lose hope than to prolong the inevitable.”

“Why are you saying that? You are an archangel! You can help us. You can help Earth. Do you think you will not be affected?”

“I will be. I will be okay. What you are trying to accomplish is simply a figment of imagination. You will never complete your fantastic quest, even if I tell you the place.”

“You can never guess the result if you never try. If we are going to lose, so let it be. At least, we have tried, unlike you, who waits for eternal torture. But I am here, standing. I don’t care about anything else right now, because as I’ve known, I have seen Earth. They might be greedy. They might be pretentious, but they are one thing. They are united and that’s what I have learned from them.

“You can wait for your death or you can help us. Do you want to be that person who when in misery looks back and thinks, ‘Gosh, I wish I could have told that angel about the location and perhaps everything would have been all right?’ Do you want to regret this later? Because you may end up doing just that. Everything – the balance of order and chaos is on your shoulders now. If you tell us, people will respect you, but if not, they’ll spit on you.”

Metatron shook his head “Nah. Heaven is unstable now after Lucifer’s rise. Angels have become scared. What happened years ago is happening again. Everyone is choosing sides between Michael and Lucifer,”

“What side have you chosen?” Siphon asked.

Metatron blinked. All the pride and anger had washed away. He was now completely blank, as if trying to figure out how he could get away from the situation at hand and hide in some pit where he would be able to find freedom. Granted, that was just wishful thinking.

Siphon realized that Metatron was confused. He had given a speech and had no idea how it sounded. Metatron was so much older than he was; at least thousands of years old. Yet, he looked so small in front of the Dominion. He looked weak and quite aged. He could see the traces of lines and marks, all signs of his old age. Time does scar a person’s life.

“It is the Ring.”

“What do you

mean?”

“The Ring of Solomon, from which he controlled all the djinns and fairies. After the Land of Souls, Michael gave Solomon the power to be the second wielder. Solomon made that sword a part of his ring in order to hide it from everyone. The ring is the sword. The sword is the ring.”

“I have never heard of this.”

“Because, kid, it was sacred and confidential.”

Siphon’s smile grew. “Thank you. Thank you for telling me.”
Metatron nodded. “Why did you help us?”

“I did it for the billions who are innocent and who have no idea what is going on around them.” Metatron smiled. It was not as warm as Siphon’s, but was equally touching.

The door opened. Capernaum and Harvard fell to the ground. Behind them, a man stood in the doorway. He was of African-American descent, and had coal black eyes and a deadly smile on his face. It was as if the strange man was delighted to see then.

“Oh, a party is going on here, I see. And you thought of not inviting me. That’s too bad. I am hurt,” he replied.

Siphon recognized the voice. Even though he was wearing a different skin than the one he usually wore, he could identify the person via his soul and his heart. His heart thumped within his chest and his nerves grew taut. His hands clenched into tight fists and sweat dripped from his palms. He knew well whom it was that now stood before him.

“Raphael!” Siphon breathed the name so quietly that he could barely hear it.

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Caspar couldn’t believe it. Standing in front of him with his stature quite blurred was King Solomon. He’d always admired Solomon for his wisdom and his power. He had learned the art of trapping small djinns through the use of a ring made

out of a goblin's skin inspired by Solomon himself. Yet that ring couldn't compete with the Ring of Solomon, a signet ring that had the power to control every fairy and every djinn except for Oberon. As of now, it was lost in time and could never be seen by naked eyes.

The apparition didn't react. It just stood there. Caspar thought that perhaps Solomon was scared or was not showing such favorable attitude toward the newcomer. The spectre shimmered slowly until it disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Where has he gone?"

"What you saw is part of my subconscious. That was just a projection. I only see him in dreams or when I am afraid or tense."

"We won't see him again," Caspar mused.

"No. Well, that's the case. Only I can see him." Hope pushed herself off of her bed, displaying her petite frame dressed in her pajamas which had teddy bears printed on it. "Argh, do you have any idea how frustrating it is? No one believing you. No one supporting you in such a crisis. No one even trying to understand your problem."

She moved to the window and looked out, a warm gush of wind swept past her. "My studies went downhill until I went crazy. The person I loved left me because he thought I was insane. My mother died. Well, not because of me, but still, that counts as a tragedy. I started having visions of a person who is mentioned in Bible, a book I don't believe in."

Caspar was befuddled at the last words she spoke. "You don't believe in Bible? Aren't you Christian?"

"I am a Protestant, but non-practicing. I lost faith in God the day all everything piled over me. I knew, at that moment, that there is no God and there

perhaps will never be. He was just a deity of a small tribe whose cult slowly expanded to various places."

Ivy arched her brows. "You can't blame God for that."

"I would have if there was ever one. If God had been there, looking down at me, he would have helped me. I am sure that God does not exist."

"That's preposterous," Caspar said. "There's a destiny given to us to fulfill. Everyone has one. You just don't know what it is."

"Tell me, have you ever seen Him?" she asked. "Who?"

"God."

"No, of course not," Caspar replied. "How do you know He's there, then?"

"Because...because . . ." Caspar stammered. Yet his resolve strengthened. "Faith. I have faith."

"Whatever you have done till now, did you ever think that He's helping you?" Caspar contemplated her words. All the while, he had heard about Michael,

Lucifer, Raphael, and the other angels. He had heard about everyone, even about Metatron, but he had never once heard about God from their mouths. If God had wanted it to be so, Lucifer would not have risen. He could have easily disallowed it, but He didn't. If God had wanted Lucifer to die, He could have easily done it, but he didn't. His faith, which had always been there walking along with him, slowly started to fade.

"Eh? Do you have a reply for that?"

Caspar always had a reply for one thing or another. "Who do you trust the most? Your father?"

“No. Solomon,”
Hope said. “Why do
you trust him?”

“Because, I think whatever he says, he is saying the
truth.” “How are you so sure about it?”

“Because I trust him.”

“So basically, it’s just a fifty-fifty percent probability. He could even lie to you,” he pointed out.

“But he’s not lying,” she countered.

“You seem so sure. He is lying to you. He is saying the truth. Yet you tend to believe that he’s telling you the truth, just because you have . . .” He brought his hands up to make his point.

“Faith,” she murmured with astonishment.

“Yes. That’s what faith is, Hope. That’s what I have. That’s what Ivy has. We have faith. We have faith in Him, that He’s helping us right now. You are looking at the other side of the book. You are looking and are thinking that He doesn’t exist. But then, he could also exist. Might or might not. It’s just the way how you look towards your life.” Caspar leaned upon his cane. “If your atheist emotions are in order now, we need to have a talk.”

Initially, Hope was too stunned to reply, but she composed herself. “What do you want to tell me?” she asked.

Ivy sat down beside her. Caspar was never good at saying things properly, so he stood silently with the invisible Balthazar standing nearing who was yawning a lot more than usual within the corner and staring at the two girls. Caspar could see how different the two girls were. Yet their similarities were also uncanny.

They were young and tragedy had hit the both of them. They had lost a parent, one way or the other, and both of them were sad. He saw as Ivy's calm exterior and her soft skin reminded him of a crossbow field. Hope was equally beautiful with bright blue hair, sharp light gray eyes, and a curved jaw. Her skin was tanned, unlike Ivy's, who was as white as snow.

Hope gasped and 'wow'ed, every now and then. She would shake her head, refusing to believe any of what she heard from Ivy. Sometimes, she would nod and think that perhaps Ivy was saying the truth. In the end, she sighed and snuck a glance at Caspar, as if through her eye contact she was trying to say something to him, something he should know. She turned her back to Ivy, who patted her arm as she told her to get dressed.

Caspar exited the room with Balthazar in tow in search of Hope's father. He explained that she would stay with them for some time. On hearing that, her father literary jumped in delight because Hope never used to have night outs and had always been an anti-social maverick. But now, everything had changed.

Hope's father let her go. Without tarrying any further, they left her home. It took hours for them to reach the House of David. Far away, they saw the isolated beach house as if it was lonely and full of despair and sadness.

Hope was surprised. According to Solomon, the House of David had pillars, pavements, granite floors, long thrones, marbled tables, and beautiful chandeliers. Though, the beach house was completely different, it was unique and contrasted sharply with the other houses found nearby.

Balthazar became visible, startling Hope completely.

"Blimey!" she gasped as she nearly tripped, but found support within Caspar's

arms.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, tightening his hold as he brought her close, their chests almost touching. She met his eyes, unable to make sense of what she saw within them. Caspar himself felt a tad confused. He settled her back on to her feet. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ivy's nose flare in disgust.

"What is that?" Hope asked.

Balthazar turned to him. "I don't like her, Caspar. As she says 'what' to the most beautiful gargoyle ever lived on Earth?"

"Every gargoyle looks the same, I guess."

"Okay, gal, that's enough." To his irritation, Balthazar ignored her. "What's his problem?" Hope asked quietly, to Caspar.

"He doesn't like when people comment on his...um...beauty."

Hope smiled. Caspar didn't react to it. He saw Ivy again, who now wasn't looking at him, but her face was pinched tight, for some reason. He neared the house and knocked upon its door. No one answered. He knocked again. There was no sound, whatsoever, coming from inside the house. He looked at his companions, feeling a tad perplexed. Their faces mirrored the same expression he wore upon his face. None were sure as to what was going on.

He turned the knob and the door opened. The long, lonely corridor spread out before him. He clutched his cane tightly as he moved forward and made his way into the common room. Fib was sleeping on the couch, drooling over it and snoring loudly. His spectacles were lying on the floor. Caspar banged his cane on the ground with force. Fib got up, his eyes blurry as he looked around, trying to make sense of what had happened.

"Hey, guys." He waved at them sheepishly. "How's it going?" "Where is Vivian?"

“Who?”

“The Prophet, you idiot. Where is she?”

Caspar grew restless as he looked around the house. Balthazar and Ivy did their best to search, as well. Hope sauntered inside, dragging her bag along with her as she wondered as to what was going on.

Once the entire house was searched, Caspar approached Fib. He no longer cared about the fact that Fib admired him or that he was the kind of kid who got bullied by everyone all the time. He didn’t pity his timid look, his small pimples, his oily hair, and his large spectacles.

He grabbed Fib’s collar and partially strangled him as he said, “For how long were you sleeping?”

“I – I – I don’t k – know...I – I don’t remember,” Fib stammered, his pupils growing pale.

“Where is Vivian?”

“S – She...I don’t know. She was in this room a few hours ago and now...uh...she’s not here.”

Caspar tossed him to the ground. He bounced as he fell upon his chest, his spectacles falling several meters away. His nose was now bleeding, a small red circle forming across his throat. Ivy ran over to him to see if he was okay, only to find that he had a broken nose and was now unconscious.

“What have you done to him?” she cried.

“We have a problem in our hands, Ivy,” Caspar growled. “The Prophet – she’s missing. Damn! She’s missing. Lucifer must have gotten her somehow.”

De vil's Abyss

Siphon couldn't believe that he was there in front of Raphael. Raphael seemed so calm and so suave, unlike the man he knew in Heaven, where he was ruthless and always shouting. Maybe the new skin had gotten changed him somehow, making him into a much more peaceful person. Raphael's rain coat flapped behind him as he moved.

Two angels wearing white suits appeared, their faces devoid of any expression. Raphael, on the other hand, looked amused. Perhaps it was because he was staring at Siphon who seemed so small in front of him, almost like a toddler. Raphael was one of the Four Blood Brothers His aura was strong and affective, causing Siphon to remain rooted in place.

"You disappointed me, Siphon," Raphael said, smiling. "Why would you do

that?"

Siphon didn't answer.

"I should answer that for you, I suppose. You are in love." Raphael's voice was certain. He must have heard of that fact from other rival angels. They must have told him about his disobedience and the breakage of angelic law. "Now, an angel falling for a pathetic oracle – well, that's a nice story we've got here."

Capernaum pulled himself to his feet as Harvard dusted his coat. They came to stand beside Siphon.

"You are working with a demon and a werewolf? That's worse than dying," Raphael stated as he walked up to the laptop and gave it a quick look. "I shall make sure that you get the harshest punishment any angel has ever gotten."

Siphon’s mouth pressed into a tight line. He dreaded the thought of the kind of punishment Raphael would exact upon him. His legs grew numb. To his surprise, he almost slunk to the floor.

“Why are you here?” Capernaum asked.

“That doesn’t concern you, demon,” Raphael replied haughtily “It does.” Capernaum smiled. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

He sounded as if he knew Raphael. With a fleeting glance, Raphael glanced at him as he tried to understand if he could find a trace of someone he had known in the past. When he found what he was looking for, his face relaxed and he smiled. “Ah, Capernaum! It’s been so long,”

“How do you know him?” Metatron asked.

“We were good friends back then,” Raphael answered. “We had a connection, you and me. But you spoiled it all and bore the consequences for the same reason Siphon has.”

“You were in love?” Siphon and Harvard asked in unison.

Capernaum could be considered as a Russian mafia boss, but never a person who would have fallen in love. He seemed so elegant and dangerous at the same time. There was no shadow of an expression on his face that could suggest he’d been in love in some distant past. He refused to tell them anything and remained rigid instead.

“We aren’t here to discuss my past.”

“Oh, but we should.” Raphael was clearly having fun. “How did you know we were here?” Harvard asked. “My brother told me,” Raphael replied with honesty. “Gabriel?” Harvard prodded.

A light bulb went off in Metatron's head. He'd been quiet for some time. "No, not Gabriel. Not the...It is Lucifer. You are working with Lucifer, Raphael?" He was shocked by the notion.

"You mind your business. You aren't in the warfare. You never were," Raphael snapped.

"Why did you take sides with The Devil?"

"The world made him the Devil. Before he wasn't Devil, he was Lucifer. He was the Morningstar. He was someone I admired, the only brother I looked up to. Michael was a pawn, a soldier who listened to Father and did his bidding, but Lucifer had a brain of his own. He knew that Earth was meant to be ours. No one paid attention to me when I took sides with Lucifer, because I was small. But now, after his rising, he comes to me and tells me to join him and I couldn't stop saying myself from saying yes."

"But you are an angel!" Harvard came forward and for the first time, he didn't look like the nervous, stammering scientist that he was. "You are destroying everything you have seen for so many years."

"I believe in the Morningstar," Raphael said.

"You're not in the correct frame of mind right now," Capernaum interrupted. "Lucifer is just getting back at his father. He is not making a place for you to live."

Raphael shook his head. "You can make me reconsider the notion, but it will be in vain. I don't care about any of you, or any of your attempts to change my mind. Right now, I am going to kill you all. Well, all except for Metatron as he wasn't part of anything and we need someone to write the great histories of the Morningstar and Raphael."

"I never shall do your bidding you traitor!" Metatron yelled.

“We’ll see about that.” Raphael smiled coolly at him. “Now, let’s start with the boy. He’s been a pain in the ass for a long time indeed.”

“How did you know we were here?” Siphon asked. “How did you know we were going to meet with Metatron.”

“Oh, um...Lucifer told me.” He was still smiling, enjoying the moment. “He said that he squeezed this piece of information from the Prophet Vivian Elijah, the person you fell in love with, Siphon.” His knowing smile grew larger.

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Lucifer was sitting in his revolving chair, looking at the mirror, which reflected his beautiful and glamorous visage. His simple, gray suit made him look appealing in the dim light of his office. He stared at his employees who worked aggressively around him.

He loved it. He loved the anxiousness and the suffering his employees were going through. They were scared of him, scared that perhaps the next instant he would strike his manic smile and do something horrible that no one could imagine.

The glass door opened, letting Leviathan in. His black suit and white tie accented his pale face, as did the way he combed his hair by parting it to the right side to give himself a pleasing aesthetic effect.

“Any progress?” he asked, his voice husky.

“Just the same,” Leviathan replied. “She just told us about the Metatron,”

“I hope Raphael doesn’t disappoint me because things could turn messy.” He rose his feet, slowly buttoning his coat. “Call her to the office. I need to see her now.”

. Lucifer could see that Leviathan wanted to offer him an opinion or a suggestion, but he shrugged the thought aside and exited the room. He made his way over to the mini bar and poured some wine into a glass. The blood red color of the drink fascinated him so much that he wanted a sip of it ever so often.

He sat on one of the sofas that were placed opposite to each other. In between was a small rectangular table so shallow that it wasn't even noticeable. Lucifer sipped his drink once more, his eyes roving toward the door. He eagerly awaited the Prophet's arrival.

He glanced at his watch, a diamond studded Rolex. Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes until the door opened and a feeble looking girl with golden hair walked inside. She had a small cut upon her cheek, which was scarlet in color.

"Hello Vivian! I'm Longhorn Darcy." "You are Lucifer, I know."

"Perhaps my detractors have told you about me." "Why are you after me?"

Lucifer ignored her question. From his coat's inner pocket, he pulled out a thin envelope. He slapped it on to the table and slowly slid it toward Vivian. "I know you are a bright child, Ms. Vivian Elijah. I know you value your education more than anything and that is the reason, I am giving you this."

Vivian's brow creased in confusion. She took the envelope while keeping her gaze upon him. She unwrapped it and saw a letter.

"It is a recommendation from me to Yale. A recommendation from someone like me can get you straight into the heart of that university."

He came on his feet, while Vivian clutched the edges of the letter tightly. She gazed at it with concentration as if her own life depended on it.

“Think about it, Vivian. Think about what you will achieve. The education you longed for, imagine how much your parents would be proud of you. The society would look up to you and your rivals would be jealous of you. Think about the feeling you’d get.” He walked around the sofa.

Vivian’s eye didn’t waver for a second. She kept reading the same words, again and again, to see if there was some loophole, something that said that it was all wrong. But it wasn’t like that. A cat-like shine flashed in her eyes. Lucifer’s hand gently touched her shoulder and her heart began to pound erratically.

“You will get the highest of social statuses, Vivian. You would study in the best university and graduate from there. In return for such a big offer, all would require is a little information. Just tell me how to bind the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

She looked in Lucifer’s direction. “I don’t know who the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse are or how to bind them.”

“If you stress your mind and think about it with all your concentration, you will be able to answer my question,” Lucifer said, his voice as sweet as nectar and deeply persuasive. “You can change your life, Vivian. You can change everything about yourself. You can start a new life.”

“W – What about Siphon?”

“Oh, that angel...?” His voice had gone from sleek to rough. “I will strip off his wings personally and make him a mortal so he could, with no distraction, stay with you.” He smiled widely, his dimples deepening upon his cheeks. “You will have everything, the life you want, the boy you love, and the status you wanted. All in exchange for a little information that will do you no harm.” His eyes were almost bobbing out of their sockets.

“But what about the Earth?”

“Your friends, they have given you false information. I am not going to do any harm to this world. Look at me, Vivian,” he urged as he crept closer to the glass door, his skinny jaw loosening. “Look at me and see! I have everything I want. Why would I greed for more? I have power, I have money, and I have respect. Why would I need more?”

“So why are you binding some Horsemen?”

“They are stronger than me and the people who are stronger than me...um...shouldn’t exist. So I am going to bind them, in a way which would allow me to use them for my own purposes. I am not evil, Vivian. People consider those they can’t understand evil. People don’t understand me. That’s not my fault.”

“Are you...are you lying? I am sure you are lying.” Even though, it was a statement, it sounded like a question, as if she was trying to reassure herself.

“Now, why would I lie to you? Hmmm? To extract information? No, not at all,” Lucifer said. “I’ll tell you my objective and if you still think I am lying, then so be it. There’s the door, you will be free to go.”

He moved toward her. “I pity this world, Vivian. I pity it badly. The world we live in has been made into Hell. Worse than Hell, in fact. I see that the world we live in is now slowly disintegrating into the abyss of night and slowly, everything will end. I am trying to help this world. I am trying to purge it of all kinds of hatred humans have possessed for one another. I am trying to make a big heart out of this round ball of gases. To make it, I need that information.”

Lucifer walked over to his table and picked up a folder. He flipped through its page quickly. “So, what do you think?”

She examined the recommendation paper and then looked up at Lucifer Morningstar's small, smooth smile. She looked down once more, trying to think about what she should do. "I . . ." Her small fingers grabbed the edges of the paper. "I don't know." She shivered. Her skin had gone from brown to white. "People say to not help the bad guys,"

Lucifer smiled. He didn't retort or retaliate. He stood there and smiled, as if he was happy with her decision. His fingers curled about his glass of wine. He took a sip from it before grabbing the LCD remote and switched the television on.

"Then perhaps, people would have also said you have no other choice but to help the bad guys, if they have your parents captured." He pointed at the screen.

Vivian's eyes widened. Her blood surged, pumping loudly within her chest. She sighed. She couldn't feel anything, as a profound numbness took over. Her lips shriveled as the tension built around her. Her parents were taken hostage and they had bruises and cuts all over their faces. She was sure that they'd been beaten and tortured, for the blood drained from their faces.

"So, now I hope you will reconsider." Lucifer's smile grew. "After all, I have to clean up this world."

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Siphon could feel his heart pulled apart as Vivian's name spilled from the archangel's lips. Vivian. She was in trouble and she was with Lucifer. What ungodly things would that Devil do to her? He wanted to know and needed to find out, but all he could think about was how he could escape so that he could go to the corporation's head office and fight off the Morningstar.

Raphael stepped forward to attack Siphon, but Capernaum moved in between of them. “We had good memories, Capernaum, but don’t think that for even one second I will not harm you.”

“I am not thinking that at all.”

Without another thought, Capernaum began his attack. He smashed his arm across Raphael’s cheek. Raphael was taken aback. He touched his reddened cheeks and grinned.

“I am an archangel, Capernaum.”

“If you are an archangel, then I am an ultra-demon.”

Metatron moved back and hid so he wouldn’t be included in the fight. Harvard looked at him with distaste.

“You are a disgrace to an angel,” he said.

“I was never a warrior, werewolf. I wasn’t born to be one, nor do I have the skills of a warrior.”

“A person doesn’t become a warrior by training or skills. They become one through their soul and their heart.”

Harvard changed into his werewolf. This was the first time he’d initiated a controlled transformation from a human to werewolf. For many years, he’d tried really hard to control his powers. He used to do yoga and meditation, used to sit alone and played music so he could relax. But when the full moon came, he wasn’t able to control his wolf part and he’d changed, none-the-less. He’d changed so roughly that he’d almost destroyed half of his house. As the time passed, he could see that through his calm demeanor, he was able to control the emotions of his alter-ego, Eros. It was not long before Eros and Harvard became the same person.

Harvard Manning knew how to initiate the change within himself without any qualms, whatsoever. His hands started to grow thick dark hair which spread all over his body. His nose and his lips began to expand outward and his eyes changed colors. His ears lengthened and grew wide. He pulled off his coat as his white shirt was ripped away. His legs became massive and huge, exploding out of his pants, and his feet burst through his boots. Blood dripped off his fingers as long and pointy claws broke through the skin. He howled after his metamorphosis was completed.

The two angels came forward. One went for Eros and the other stormed in Siphon's direction. Siphon swiftly fought the angel with his bare hands. His wings unfurled, but the other angel's wings were bigger. The angel brought a long knife forward, a seraph. He slashed at Siphon's wing but Siphon moved and grabbed the angel as he moved behind him. They flew toward the roof, breaking through it as they climbed higher into the open air.

Siphon pushed the angel as they fought across the horizon. The angel became confused as his adversary disappeared momentarily. To his surprise, a fist slammed into his face. The angel fell back, the seraph loosening from his grip. His clothes were torn as he tumbled into the forest below. Siphon caught the seraph before it disappeared from his view and raced down to see the injured angel. Two sharp branches pierced the soft feathers of his wing. Golden blood dripped from the wounds.

Siphon knelt beside the downed angel and said, "Think before you choose sides. Evil always falls. Maybe it will win now, maybe it will not, but it would surely fall someday because evil never remains stable long enough."

He plunged the seraph into the angel's chest. Its skin started to crumple, like a paper, and slowly turned into ashes until there was nothing else left behind. The seraph remained, a distant memory of the one to whom it belonged.

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Eros grabbed the angel and threw it across the room. The angel regained his balance and opened its wings as it charged toward the werewolf. A seraph was clutched within its hand. He deflected the blow, preventing the angel from striking once more. He pulled the angel's legs up and shook him hard. He punched and kicked him until he was bruised and spitting blood.

The angel's eyesight became clouded with every kick. Throwing him about, he tore off the angel's head before tearing off his hands. He separated its torso and tossed the body parts around. Before he knew it, the angel was no more.

> Eros grinned at Metatron. "That's how I kick ass!" he said with pride. Metatron was too stunned to speak.

***

Capernaum and Raphael's fight wasn't quite visible to the naked eye. They were so fast that no one could see them moving their fists, legs, ankles, and heads. Capernaum could predict Raphael's every attack and Raphael could also do the same. It was a fight of equals with no end. The demon used to train with Raphael before and knew his exact moves.

Out of nowhere, a blade was plunged into Capernaum's stomach. He stared at the blade with surprise. He couldn't feel anything, although he heard a series of hymns being played inside his mind. The useless combat action he was having with Raphael had been in vain as he fell down on his knees, the color draining from his body.

Raphael smiled with triumph. "This is the end, Capernaum. Say goodbye to

Earth."

Capernaum found it hard to speak. He wanted to, but no sound slid past his lips. He touched his wound and felt nauseated. He had been in many battles over many centuries and had been an integral part of warfare, but he had never been stabbed by an Archangel's Seraph. He knew such a weapon could poison him or kill him. He fell down to the ground, his body shivering softly.

Eros came forward and growled, "You will die now."

"Oh, please, werewolf. I am an Archangel. My true form is bigger than an Empire State Building. I am the most powerful and ruthless . . ."

Eros grabbed his legs and threw him out of the house before he could say anything more.

"That was quite fast."

Eros smiled. He knelt close to Capernaum and picked him up within his arms as if he were a small baby. Capernaum's body was that of an old man. He comfortably cradled the demon's head against his furry chest. A wingless Siphon strode inside.

"We should go," he suggested as he noted Capernaum's current condition.

He tried to help him, but Eros refused the offer. They stumbled out of the house to find that Raphael was now gone. An ominous silence reigned around them, one they could not yet explain.

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Vivian had no idea what to do. She was so absorbed in her own problems that she almost forgot about her parents. Seeing them on the monitor, bruised and broken, pulled upon her heartstrings. Her eyes filled with tears and her vision blurred. Her hands shook as she wept softly.

She let go of the letter and pressed her hands against her forehead. Her parents were in danger. They were being punished because of her. They were being hurt and tortured because of who and what she was. Her heart was full of pain as she blamed herself for their current predicament. A profound hollow feeling filled her and she wondered if she'd be able to come out of things unscathed.

Her parents looked weak and pathetic, as if they hadn't gotten a meal in days. Their backs were scored with long, sharp scars, a clear indication that they were flogged. Blood dripped from the cuts and marks, smeared all over their skin. It was too much to take in. Vivian had always been a light-hearted girl and had never gone into danger. She'd never seen anything violent. Now, things had changed and her own parents were suffering because of her.

"Mr. Ramirez Elijah is a consultant of Harold Co. Firm. Mrs. Diana Elijah is practicing law," Lucifer read loudly from the file he held before him.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. It was impossible to even say it angrily to the Morningstar. The words refused to come forward freely and were stuck in her throat. “Why are you doing this? Why did you have to involve my parents?”

“Oh, Vivian, I hate to do all this.” He shut the file. “When you want something in life, you have to hurt a few to get it. That’s the truth of life.” He kept the file on the table. “Your parents, they are such good people. They live with such a good status in society. You are rich, you are powerful, and you study in a good school. You’ve lived a great life. Do you really want to give it all up? If you tell me how to bind the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, I will let them go.” He pointed at the screen. “Right now, without even delaying a second.”

Her mouth trembled. She knew she wanted to lash out at him. To hurt him in the same manner that he’d ordered his men to hurt her parents. Her eyes were blood red, impassively staring at Lucifer with dread and anger.

“Let’s make it easy for you. They have no idea what is going on here. They can’t see you and me. They are thinking they’re being kept hostage because of money.” He showed her his cell phone. “They don’t know that all of this happened because of you. I make one call and my men will let them be. But you have to give me something and you know what that something is,”

Vivian mumbled unintelligibly. Lucifer came forward. “What?” he asked. He put his hand across his earlobe to find her words audible. Vivian spoke again. Lucifer frowned as he drew closer to her, his ear next to her lips. “Yes, tell me, Vivian. Tell me what I want to know. Tell me, what are you saying right now?”

“FUCK YOU!” she cried as she leaned forward and bit Lucifer’s ear.

He fell back with surprise. She tried to tear his skin off as she jerked her head back, refusing to let go of his earlobe. Lucifer snapped his fingers and she flew back against the wall. He promptly pinned her against the wall.

“Crazy bitch,” he snarled as he pushed himself to his feet. He gingerly touched his ear and found several splotches of blood as he withdrew his hand. It pained him to see his life source painted across his fingers. “You are one sick prophet. You little dirty slut! You want to play games? Okay, fine. I’ll play games with you as well.”

He dialed a number and waited for someone to pick it up. “Hello? Yes, Ziklag, you know what to do.” Angrily, he slammed the phone down and pointed at the screen. “Look at your dear parents.”

Vivian was still pinned on the wall. She struggled against her invisible bonds in hopes of setting herself free, but was unable to do so. She froze as she heard several cries coming from somewhere. She looked around, her heart racing as she listened to the cries of someone familiar.

She caught sight of the monitor. Her mother, in a semi-nude state, was being flogged by a man with a hood on. A big whip made out of synthetic leather was swishing back and forth across her back. With each hit across her bare back, a cry slid past her lips. She scrunched her eyes, refusing to see the horror playing on the screen.

Soon, it was her father’s turn. The hooded man wet a white towel and stuffed it inside her father’s mouth, slowly pushing it, deeper and deeper until his cries, shrieks, and shouts were inaudible. The scene spreading out before her was too much for Vivian to see. Her father writhed in pain, unable to make a sound.

“If you don’t tell me now, bitch, I am going to order my men to kill your mother or father,” Lucifer threatened. He frowned with irritation. “And that will happen in front of your eyes, so choose wisely.”

“O – Okay, I’ll do it! I’ll tell you everything you want to know.” Tears fell down her cheeks. She couldn’t take it any more. Her parents were suffering because of her.

Lucifer unpinned her from the wall and he snapped his fingers again. Vivian sat down on the sofa and concentrated hard to find the information he requested on how to bind the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. His brows arched and his lips pursed as he watched her, reassuring himself that she wasn’t doing anything mischievous.

She fell back onto the sofa. Lucifer wasn’t in shock. He had seen prophets do the same thing before. The lady with the white eyes and long hair was not Vivian, but someone else.

Her voice was raspy as she spoke. “What do you want to know?”

“I need to bind the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse,” Lucifer said, pacing the floor in agitation.

“To bind Famine, War, Pestilence, and Death, you need to break the four seals.”

“Four seals? Ah. Of course! I should have known.” Lucifer smiled. “I should have remembered. The four seals are personal belongings of the Four Horseman. Excellent!”

Vivian shook her head. The raspy voice and the white pupils were now gone and she was back to her old self. She touched her forehead. “Am I – Did I tell you what you wanted to know?”

His expression was stable. “Yes.”

“Let my parents go, then,” she said with little hope as she took a step forward.

He reached for his cell phone and began to dial a number, but stopped in mid-action. He grabbed the remote and switched off the screen.

He turned to face her. “That was a recorded tape. This wasn’t happening in the present.”

“What do you mean?”

“I recorded that tape of your parents being tortured before I killed them with my own hands.”

So undless Whispers

Caspar paced the room as he tried to think of all the possibilities where the Prophet could be. Perhaps she'd gone out for a drink or some snacks. The prospect didn't seem likely, though, as there were snacks aplenty through the house. A veritable feast she could enjoy any time she chose.

Perhaps she needed fresh air and that's the reason, she might have gone out. Yet there was no one on the beach. He came up with the most likely possibility for her sudden disappearance. Lucifer had kidnapped her. But how? Had he taken her when she'd gone out for some fresh air while Fib was sleeping? Had she found Lucifer and his demons ready to whisk her away at a moment's notice? There were so many variables to consider and each of them was the most likely.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the shiny ring glint on Hope's finger as she kept rubbing at it in nervousness. He found himself deep in though when a knock sounded upon the door. Ivy hurried away to answer it. Balthazar stood to the side, lost in his worries.

Ivy opened the door to find Harvard standing before her wearing tattered clothes. His chest was chest and his pants and shoes were scorched. Within his arms, he carried the still body of an old man. Siphon held up the rear as he tried to support the old man's leg.

"Sir! Capernaum!" Ivy cried.

Harvard carefully deposited Capernaum upon the sofa, who whispered to himself as if uttering prayers. His face was paler than usual and his bones were visible

in the sharp light. A deep, long serpentine wound ripped across his stomach, black blood coating the jagged edges.

"It was the Archangel's Seraph," Siphon began. "He's going to die." His voice was sad. Caspar was surprised to see an angel feeling sad for a demon.

"But he can't!" Ivy cried, blinking rapidly to hold back her tears off. She knelt beside the sofa and gently patted the old man's hair in hopes if

seeing him improve, but nothing happened. She looked at Harvard and Siphon, feeling tired and frustrated.

Siphon caught Ivy's shoulder and turned her around. "He's not going to live long. Perhaps an hour or so. We can't do much about it, I'm afraid. We brought him here to give him a bit of comfort before he slips away."

Caspar found himself at a loss for words. Capernaum was dying and the Prophet had been kidnapped. Death was nowhere to be found. They were in deep trouble. He leaned on his cane, using it for support.

"Where is the Holy Sword?" Caspar inquired.

Everyone's attention turned toward him. He now sounded burly and authoritative.

"Where is the Holy Sword?" he asked again.

Siphon and Harvard exchanged glances, as if they were keeping that information for later. Siphon met Hope's gaze. She shook her head and looked away.

"Is she the descendant?"

Caspar nodded. Siphon confronted her and held on to her hands. His eyes widened as realization dawned. It wasn't her hands he was holding, but a finger. A small signet ring beautifully crafted with silver inscriptions on it was wrapped around the slender digit. Sigils of a pentagram, the symbol of fire, an upward triangle, the

symbol of water, a downward triangle, and the alchemical symbol for earth and water shown clearly across the ring's surface. Her ring was the Seal of Solomon.

"You are wearing the Ring of Solomon and you didn't tell us?" Caspar accused angrily.

"What's so special about this ring?" she shot back, feeling affronted, for she had no idea about the ring's true significance.

"This is the Ring of Solomon," Siphon said. "Solomon used to wear it during the time of his reign so he could control the magical entities who wanted to make trouble for him. Where did you get this?"

She stared at her hand, her brow slightly furrowed. "It's a family heirloom, passed to me from my mother's side before she was bed ridden."

Caspar came to stand before her, gingerly taking her hand in his. "Ah, now I see. This explains why Solomon's apparition is always with you. Because you are wearing his ring, he is able to connect to this world and you."

"So if I remove this ring my problems will be solved?" He nodded. "Absolutely."

She yanked her hand out of Caspar's grasp and prepared to pull off the ring. Siphon gently touched her hands and said, "You can take the ring off, but not

yet. Caspar, this is the Holy Sword."

Sharp gasps erupted throughout the entire room. Siphon explained that when Michael gave Solomon the Sword, he'd crafted the sword into the shape of the ring so no one would know about it. It was the only way he knew of in order to keep it hidden it from everyone else.

Caspar smiled. "It's done, then. We've done it. We have to kill Lucifer now. Yes. Right now!"

Everyone nodded. Ivy hurried to her room to change into her battle gear. Harvard sought a new set of clothes. Balthazar made his way to Caspar's room to pull on his belt with the knife attached to it. Fib followed Ivy with Hope in tow so that she could give them something to do. Capernaum remained still upon the sofa, muttering to himself.

When everyone had gone, Siphon said, "Vivian is with...She's with Lucifer right now."

Caspar understood his plight. He knew Siphon loved Vivian and would do anything to keep her safe. The fact that she was held captive against her will was not lost on either of them. He'd do everything possible to get the Prophet back in one piece.

"We are going there. We'll be able to stop him from hurting her, Siphon. We can't do anything better than that," Caspar said mildly.

Initially he hated all this love and relationship stuff, but seeing the way the two inseparable lovers were with each other, he wanted to help them. Siphon beamed, though his smile wasn't as joyous and enthusiastic. It was a little weak and sadness pervaded within it. Though, there were hints of hope within his eyes.

He turned away from him and looked at Capernaum, whose hand had risen into the air and was now beckoning him. Caspar knelt down beside him. Capernaum's skin was no longer pale. He smiled and clasped his friend's hand.

"He requested that I give him more time," a sharp voice replied from the back of the room.

Caspar looked up to find Death hovering in a corner. He looked weak and tired just like everyone else. "Where the hell were you?" he grated.

“Right now, you shouldn’t ask me the questions. You should talk to Capernaum. Personally, he prayed to me so that he could be given some more time.”

Caspar had seen him muttering to himself. The thought that he was praying to Death for more time hadn’t crossed him mind.

“What is it that you have to tell me?” he asked Capernaum.

“You never trusted me, Caspar. I can understand that. I am a demon. No one trusts a demon. But you should know one thing . . .” He swallowed nervously to dislodge the lump in his throat. “I wasn’t always a demon.”

Caspar’s heart raced upon hearing that. Capernaum resembled a demon, yet he confirmed he wasn’t. He was a tad confused and brought his ear close to Capernaum’s lips.

“I was born as an angel. I was an archangel and had many brothers. Uriel, Raphael, Gabriel, Michael – they all knew me. We used to have fun together and played with Cherubims or Malachim, who are the lower class of angels. We were to be very happy until something happened to change all that.

“I was given a duty to perform by Michael, the eldest of us all, to help the king of Crete, Minos. I hope you know about Minos or Crete. It is all connected to the Minotaur and Theseus which we see in storybooks nowadays. At that time, I was helping him with defeating demons, when I met his daughter, Ariadne. She was young and beautiful and I fell for her. I loved her. I didn’t care about anything else except her and she felt the same way.”

He took a deep breath. It was too much for an old man to speak. He held his breath for a moment and then continued, “Minos found out about our forbidden relationship. He didn’t want Ariadne to fall for an angel who was immortal and would

leave her once she got get old. Minos informed my brothers of the occurrence, complaining to the eldest of us, Michael.

“He was angry. He said I broke the law and that I had a forbidden relationship with a mortal. It was then that I realized Michael hated me. I still don’t know why. Perhaps, I took all of the attention from him or perhaps everyone loved me and everyone thought he was an angel with no brains of his own. He hated me so much that he ripped my wings off and tossed me out of Heaven.

“I became a fallen angel just like Lucifer. I had no place to go. Ariadne was dead and I was all alone. Lucifer and I met. He wanted me to join his army, to be a demon, to become stronger. I agreed to be an ultra-demon. I didn’t agree because I had no place to go, but because I could be a mole inside to know things and help the angels out.

“I did it because of my race. My race punished me for falling in love, but I helped them for so long. I thought I was doing right by them, but even now they do not care. I continue helping them, none-the-less. And that is the reason, Caspar, I never call Lucifer my creator, because he wasn’t my creator, he never was. He was always the bad one and I knew that.

“I helped you – everyone because deep in my heart, I was still an angel, the same young fellow who used to throw golden apples at the female angels in Heaven. I was still that fool. As I lay dying right now, I have no regrets because I have served the angels and my Mother Earth well. I did it well. I did it good. And Caspar, from all of this, I learned one thing.” He paused.

Somehow, Caspar knew what he said next would be his final words. So he listened carefully, ignoring the sudden blurriness within his eyes.

Tears...He’d never

shed any before. Yet here he was, shedding tears for a demon – no, an angel who had come to mean something to him in more ways than one in so short a time.

“I learned that people always look at the mistakes you have committed in the past, but they never look at the deeds you have done in the present.” He smiled softly. Caspar knew it was the last smile he’d ever see from him. “Farewell, Caspar Socrates. I am sure you will defeat Morningstar because we believe in you. I believe in you!”

His eyes closed and his chest shuddered as he took his last breath. For a moment, it sounded as if there was something being knocked around inside his chest. With one last heave, the sound dissipated and Capernaum lay still.

Caspar lowered his head and wept, tears streaming down his cheeks as he gave him in to the pain welling up within him. Death approached him and patted him gently on the shoulder before he drew Capernaum up. He watched as Capernaum’s soul pulled from his body. Death’s face was devoid of emotion as he caught Capernaum’s spirit and guided him through the portal. The last thing Caspar saw before he disappeared was a wave from the angel.

Re velations

Ivy stood at the ready dressed in her combat gear. Fib was wearing a long purple coat and held a long wooden wand within his hand. Balthazar's belt was wrapped snugly about his waist. Harvard looked normal dressed in his simple clothes. Siphon had tugged on his rugged jacket and lounged in a corner, waiting for the order to move to be given. Caspar dangled his satchel in one hand and used the other to hold the cane Death had gifted him against his chest.

"He didn't die a demon's death, but that of a hero. After all of this is over, we hope to give him a proper burial," Caspar announced. "But for now, we need to go."

Before they departed, Caspar had a little talk with Death who had quietly re-entered the House of David. Caspar kept the conversation with Death quiet, not wanting anyone to hear even a whisper of what he had to say. When the proceedings were over, Balthazar saw Caspar pass a small note to Death who nodded in return. Death soon disappeared and Caspar returned to the room.

No one asked what their talk was about. Everyone was scared. Balthazar wanted to stay home, away from everything and everyone currently in this small house. He could see that everyone else wanted to do the same, but each had a purpose to fulfill. He had one as well and briefly remembered the words that fueled his purpose.

"You are a disgrace to our family, Balthazar! You are a coward. Because of you, your brothers could have died. You risked everyone. You are not my son. After this, you will never be!"

Balthazar had to go out and fight. He needed to show his father, his family, and his peers that he was not a coward. He was just as good a gargoyle as they were.

He looked at everyone. Their energy was dwindling, their auras faint. They were trying their best not to look physically weak, yet they were failing in that endeavor. He strengthened his resolve and vowed to complete his mission. Not only for himself, but also for everyone he cared for.

Caspar opened the door. The slight breeze made everyone's heart light. The weather was cool. Balthazar saw Caspar's fear mirrored within his eyes. He was afraid to go out and face the end. Either they would win or they would lose. There was a probability they'd be able to return alive. One, it seemed, he wasn't quite ready to consider.

It was then that Balthazar knew what he needed to do. He pushed past everyone, his wings fluttering as he moved. He flew through the door, a slight smile hovering over his lips. He out of the safe zone, intent of making things right somehow. His chin rose with determination as he turned around to face them.

Slowly, one by one, everyone exited the safe house.

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Lucifer had broken two of the seals. It was easy for him to do so. He had known everything he needed to know of Famine and Pestilence and knew where their belongings were kept. Famine had a long bracelet, which she loved dearly. He'd broken that by entering her realm. As for Pestilence, he had a small pendant, which he used to wear. He broke that, too.

The only problem was that the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse could only be bound if all of the Four Seals are broken. For now, Lucifer had broken only two. Two were left, those belonging to War and Death.

He sat in his office, chewing upon the tip of his pen, thoughtfully gazing at the scenery outside as he stared through the window when the door to his office opened. A man wearing a red leather suit who had a blue crystallized bald head walked in full of anger. Behind him, soldiers wearing burnished armour poured into the room. They were holding spears and arrows strung across their bows.

"What are you trying to do, you demon?" the figure inquired.

Lucifer smiled. "Please, calm down, War. I thought I had to make the effort to see you, but you made it easy by coming to me."

"We helped in raising you, but now you are damning us!" War retorted. "How can you betray us?"

"The way you betrayed me, War?" Lucifer pushed himself to his feet, his smile broadening. "I was happy that you helped me come here, but now, after finding out that you were using me for your own personal benefits, I feel betrayed. After I finish Earth, you would have taken me down and I can't risk that."

"Who told you that?"

"Who would it be?" Lucifer said. "Your brother,
Death," "Death...? Oh, yes." War seemed certain.
"He was lying."

"Even if he was lying, I don't think I can leave loose ends. I am not binding you because I want to save myself. I am binding you because you will help me in bringing about the Apocalypse on Earth and then I can make Earth a better place." Lucifer strode toward War. "You can't fight me here, War. Your powers are weak and you are in my domain." He took War's hand and in a single motion, he pulled off the ring he wore with swift ease. "It's over!"

He clenched his fist and crushed the ring within the palm of his hand. When he opened his fingers, there was only dust left behind. Lucifer grinned, his eyes shining with delight.

"Only one is left," Lucifer said.

War ordered the two soldiers to attack Lucifer. As they pounced at him, Lucifer waved one of his hands and pulled the soldiers apart in mid-air, promptly turning them into ashes and smoke.

Lucifer moved back toward his seat and calmly replied, "You may leave. Your assistance is not needed anymore here."

War shook with fear. He had never been afraid before. He was one of the Four Horsemen who were rigid and strong. He was stubborn for his victory. Yet now he knew there was no other way to save himself unless Lucifer took Death's Seal and destroyed it. The question was, what and where was Death's seal?

"Do you know what Death's seal is?" War asked. "I don't, but I have a prophet that does."

"Death changes his Seal according to times, unlike us. He is clever. You will never be able to find it in time."

Lucifer clapped his hands together and bestowed War with a cunning smile. "I have all the time in the world."

Two demons approached War from behind and grabbed his arms. As they dragged him back, War shouted, "You have done wrong! You have done wrong!"

War's voice faded as Lucifer stood near the glass window and looked outside with pure delight. He was winning and he was happy about it. No one could do him any harm now. Three seals were broken. The fourth had yet to be found, but there wasn't any hurry for that. He was determined to take his time with things.

The scenery that spread out before him looked massive with skyscrapers and building touching the skies and standing rigidly in the background. His eyes widened as he caught sight of something unexpected. He refused to believe what he was seeing.

The view started to change as if it was a reflection on water. The scenery was slightly distorted as it dissolved and changed before his very eyes. The new terrain forming before him was familiar to him. It was all too familiar as he noticed the red sky, the blue grass, the red dotted graves, and the big cathedral. His corporation was now in the Land of Souls.

There were no human employees working today within the corporation, except for the demons that guarded every floor. Thus, there was no worry about having humans panicking around. Yet he knew this was unusual. *How had the building ended end up here?*

"Morningstar!" someone yelled from behind him.

Leviathan appeared, numerous bloody cuts and bruises scoring his body. "What happened to you?" Lucifer asked. He was not worried about

Leviathan's being there. Although, he knew he was not able to properly handle what was going on around him. "What the hell is happening?"

"Somehow, with great difficulty, we've been transported to the Land of Souls. All of the Nephilims are waiting for us. They have entered the realm and we are trying to hold them back, but it's nearly impossible. They are too many and we were not prepared for such an attack. We have to go now or else . . ."

Leviathan gasped with surprise as an arrow pierced his heart. Black blood poured from the wound. He moaned aloud as he fell to his knees and crashed to the

ground. Lucifer's eyes widened with surprise. Caspar Socrates stood behind Leviathan's body.

***

Caspar kept Hope by his side as Siphon hurried away to find Vivian with Harvard in tow. Harvard had changed into his alter ego, Eros, and was at the ready to protect the fallen angel to the best of his ability. Fib, Balthazar, and Ivy were fighting several demons alongside Cassius and several other Nephilims. They were clearing floor after floor methodically.

Caspar stood in the open doorway clutching an empty bow within his hand. He tossed it aside and quickly morphed his cane into a shotel. Hope hovered nearby, fidgeting nervously as she had no idea as to what she needed to do.

"I told you, Lucifer," Caspar said as he walked forward with the tip of the shotel dragging across the ground. "I told you that I would be the one to cherish the look of shock upon your face." He paused and smiled. "I see that look right now upon your face."

Lucifer was speechless. He unable to form a coherent thought as he stared dumbfounded at his newest nemesis. "How did you do it?"

"Death, Fib, and I created a portal large enough for this entire building to come through. I told him to inform the Nephilims to be ready." He paused. "It's over, Lucifer. Everything is over," Caspar proclaimed. "You have lost." He turned toward the befuddled Hope. "Do it!"

"I don't know how," Hope whispered.

"Ask Solomon. He was the one who originally did," Caspar instructed.

Hope nodded. Lucifer's hand shot forward clutching a sword made out of pure electricity. The long sword buzzed and crackled with bursts of lightning. He ran toward Caspar, who immediately deflected the blow. The force of Lucifer's attack caused him to fall down.

Lucifer flapped the edges of his coat and stared at Hope. "You are Solomon's descendant. You think you can help him? Well, guess what? I am going to kill you before you even . . ."

Caspar pulled himself to his feet lunged at his opponent and tried to pierce him with his shotel, but was unsuccessful in doing so. Lucifer grabbed his shirt and pushed him back with such force that he crashed into the wall behind him.

Hope looked on, unsure of what to do. She dropped her bag down and moved to the other side of the room. A tyrannical smile crossed Lucifer's lips as he attacked Caspar who was blocking and deflecting each blow he received. She closed her eyes and concentrated on communication with Solomon.

Come on, Solomon. Come on. Tell me. Tell me. How should I do it?

She nervously rubbed the ring again and again to see if doing so would work, but nothing happened. She didn't feel anything, neither did she see anything.

Lucifer stumbled back against the wall as Caspar delivered a clean kick against his stomach. He came to his feet and charged angrily at his adversary. Caspar fought back with fervor, all the while, winking and smiling. Bloody bruises and wounds were now appearing across his body, but knowing he had an Achilles' heel kept him from feeling apprehensive.

"Are you concentrating, Hope? We don't have much time," he ground out through clenched teeth.

Hope muttered to, as she tried to figure out what she should do. Caspar was throttled by a punch and a kick across his diaphragm and stumbled back slightly.

"She will never be able to do it. I am sure about that," Lucifer taunted. "Well, I cannot die. So I have as much time as much as you do."

"You know, Caspar Socrates, I know where your Achilles' heel is," he stated confidently. Caspar was sure that he was lying.

Tell me, Solomon! she pleaded.

Caspar raised a brow in question. "Mind telling me?" He pointed at Caspar's chest. "There."

"I assume you are pointing at my nipples?" Caspar joked.

"Your heart, Caspar. Your Achilles' heel is your heart," Lucifer announced. Caspar's jaw tightened upon hearing Lucifer's claim. He continued to deflect

his blows as he bought them a little time. He glanced at Hope out of the corner of his eye. She was talking softly to herself.

"How can that be?"

"Because I have observed you. You try to be cruel and try to act like a fool, sometimes. You also have multiple personalities. What you are not, is a heartless human being. You grow weak when you know you have no one to love. I know your back story, Caspar Socrates.

"I know you took that gargoyle, Balthazar, for your own selfish reasons, because you wanted a companion. You wanted someone on your side because you felt lost and unloved. You longed for love, but you never got it. That made you weak. That is your weak spot. You will be vulnerable if you find out that everyone you know will end."

Hope saw something take shape in front of her eyes. Solomon stood before her, slender and tall, with boyish features. His brown hair fell over his eyes, impeding his vision momentarily. His smile was sweet and innocent.

"Follow the lines," he said softly and then disappeared.

Hope grew irritated. *Follow the lines? What lines? Where did lines come from?* She was the one who would open the gates to Purgatory and she had no idea what or where the lines were. She stared at the ring and saw the star and the symbol. As she contemplated it, lines began to form. *The star...it had lines!*

She kept her finger upon the star and traced the line toward the symbol. She smiled as the tip of her finger slid past the spot where the lines met. She continued moving her finger, completing the line across the symbols for fire, water, earth, and air. Soon, the lines were completed as she came back to the initial star. To her surprise, the ring began to shine.

Lucifer and Caspar's attention was drawn the light. Hope threw the ring down and stepped back. The ring began to change its shape, glowing brightly. It became a long, golden blade with a single edge. The hilt shined with numerous sapphires and esoteric runes etched across its entire length. She bent down to pick it up and found that the sword was easy to hold, as if she was meant to wield it.

"I did it! I did it, Caspar!" she cried with delight.

"That's great, but I think you should use it now," Caspar recommended. Lucifer swung his blazing sword toward Hope, intent on cutting her down.

With minimal effort, Hope was able to deflect his attack. Stupefied, Lucifer fell back onto the floor.

"NO!" he shouted. "No! This can't happen! I can't lose. Not again!"

Caspar's nose flared slightly. He leaned upon his shotel and pulled himself his feet and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I chose Land of Souls, for a reason, Lucifer. I wanted to end this where it all began. Once and for all, I need it to end. Hope . . ." He turned toward her as she held the powerful sword. "You know what to do."

He took a deep breath and stepped back. Hope came forward with the sword held high. Lucifer begged for mercy and cried aloud as tears streamed down his face. He refused to accept that a small band of miscreants had done everything within their power to try and take him down.

"The Devil is crying. You don't see that every day," Caspar snickered.

Hope thrust the blade into his flesh, penetrating it deeply until it pierced the

heart. Black blood spurted of the wound in Morningstar's chest as Hope pulled the blade free and took a step back. Lucifer pressed his hands against the jagged gash in hopes of stopping the blood that now soaked his white shirt and gray pants. He howled with rage, unable to make sense of things.

"No! No! This is not happening!"

"Make a circle and let's end this, once and for all," Caspar yelled.

The doors opened and Caspar the rest of his beloved group pile into the room. Siphon carried the unconscious Vivian within his arms. Fib brought up the rear, severely burned and wounded. Their eyes fell upon the frightened Lucifer as he tried to get as far away as possible from Hope as she moved toward him.

"You think this is the end, Caspar?" he breathed, bright black bubbles coating his lips. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, smearing more of his blood across his chin. "You think everything will end if I die, don't you? Well, you're wrong." He stifled a laugh. Caspar ignored his words as he joined the rest of the

group. “You have no idea, then. You have no idea what’s coming at you, no idea what will happen in future with you.”

Hope drew a circle, making sure that it was perfect.

“I am just the beginning. I thought I could have been the master, but I wasn’t. I learned that. The real master is someone else. Someone more powerful and much more deceptive. Chaotic, even. He’s worse than anything in this world and wants nothing more than to see the world burn.”

Unbeknownst to them, a figure walked slowly, away from the massacred Nephilims and demons. The corridor was empty, partially filled with rotten bodies, eager flies buzzing over them. The figure turned and chuckled as he made a face that glowed with happiness and smiled.

“Yes, I think you know what I mean. I think you know exactly what I am talking about.” Caspar’s eyes grew wide with amazement. “I didn’t know either, until I found out that he was not just an ordinary trickster. No. No. He was more than that. He was mysterious, secretive. He is someone that nobody can unlock and raised me.

“I thought he was a pawn, but he turned out to be the queen. I was wrong. I was all wrong and you were too, for thinking he had died not too long ago. He cannot die. You can kill me right now, but you must know it is not over. I’ll be damned in Purgatory, but he’s still free.”

“Who is he talking about?” Siphon asked.

“Manfred Croft,” Caspar whispered. “B – But I killed him!”

“You can’t kill what you don’t know,” Lucifer replied. “I’ve learned that everyone has a purpose. There are things that make us do what we do, so that we can achieve the goals we set for ourselves. Manfred is mad, for he does not have a true purpose. ”

The circle was
complete. “Where
is he now?”

Lucifer smiled, as he remained quiet.

The circle started to shine and a large, ashy pit formed. Caspar caught Lucifer and pulled him toward the circle. Before throwing him into it, he caught the collar of his shirt and inquired angrily, “If he cheated his death, where is he now? Where is Manfred Croft?”

“I didn’t know earlier, until I found out about it recently. He was always with you, Caspar. He never left you. You just didn’t see it.”

Caspar frowned. “Who was it?”

“He always liked you and never once stopped doing soon.” Lucifer grinned. “Think about it. Ugh . . .” He touched the wound staring at the blood coating his fingers momentarily before he looked up and smiled at Caspar. “He’s one of you. The only one you least expected it to be. Think about it.”

Caspar threw him down into the pit. Lucifer yelled and cried with all of his might. His words grew softer as the entire circle closed itself off and disappeared completely with him in it. Yet Caspar wasn’t satisfied. Manfred was alive. He was there. He just didn’t know where.

Thinking about what Lucifer had said, a multitude of possibilities tumbled through his head. *He was always with you.* The words reverberated inside of his mind and slowly, everything came back to him. The flashes, the words – everything clashed together with vivid clarity.

He always liked you.

He should have known. It all made sense. The answer had always been in front of him the entire time.

He fancies you, Caspar. He adores you. He wants to be with you.

Ivy had said that to him not too along ago about . . .

It never made sense as to why Vivian had left the house in the first place. Unless someone had made her leave. Someone with a vigorous power of persuasion had convinced her to go out.

Realization hit him. He scanned the small group. There was Siphon with unconscious Vivian in his arms. Ivy stood there with confusion written upon her face. Balthazar scratched his head as he frowned. Harvard stood alone in tattered clothes. Yet there was someone missing. Someone who should have been there with them, rejoicing because of Lucifer's capture.

"Where is Fib?" Caspar reached out and slid his hand across Ivy's shoulder. "Where the hell is he?"

"He...He . . ." Ivy looked around with blank eyes. Confusion rippled through the depths of her eyes as she stared back at Caspar. "He was just right here a second ago. Why?"

"How did the two of you become friends initially?"

"He just...He just . . ." She couldn't remember. "I can't remember. He came up to your house and he...He was suddenly my friend." The words spilled from her mouth slowly.

It was then that Caspar understood what had happened to her. Hypnotism, a false delusion, had been performed upon her.

Ivy shouted after him as he sped toward the door. "What is wrong? Why are you acting like this?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder as he flung the door open. "Because Fibonacci is Manfred Croft. He always has been!" With that said, Caspar was gone.

Mi rror

Caspar sprinted down the corridor in hopes of finding Manfred. He searched every corner, but could only see bodies of the deceased. He looked up to see a figure standing on the office balcony. He immediately knew who it was.

Manfred was leaning on the railing and looking down with amusement. His arms were clasped together. His thorny hair was pushed back like sharp razors. His skin rippled with runes and tattoos. He didn't react as the glass door opened behind him.

"This is the climatic end you always wanted, Manfred," Caspar said as he appeared. "This is what you wanted, isn't it? Well, here we are, just you and me." The red sky darkened above them. "This is the end."

"It was so easy to sneak in under your nose and not be noticed, Caspar," Manfred replied. "So very easy." He turned to look at Caspar. A look of joy spread across his face. "You never glanced at me. Not once. You never suspected that I would be the one. I thought being gay would take me off of the radar."

"You won, then. How did you die that time?"

"That wasn't me. That was my carbon copy that I was controlling." Manfred grinned. "I did all the things I could to be with you."

"Why did you raise Lucifer in the first place if you wanted him to die?" "What? Did you think I wanted him to die?"

"You could have stopped me as Fib whenever you wanted, but you never did, Manfred. You never did!" Caspar spat angrily.

“All right, maybe you are right. But I just wanted to have some fun.” Manfred laughed while clapping his hands together. “It pleased me to I see these small puppets being played by me, the puppet master,” He glanced about with amusement. “I am the puppet master and I just love to see all of you dance to my tune.”

“I still don’t understand the reason why you are doing this.”

Manfred’s smile vanished. “Because I don’t have one. Not everyone does something for a reason. Some people are just too wicked to have a purpose, you see.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You know me really well, Caspar. You always did. Do you really think I would have a reason? No, no, no. No, sir, I don’t have. This is just Earth, Caspar. This is just a beginning.” He brought his arms up and looked at the Land of Souls, taking in the smoky mountains spreading out before him. “I will now aim for something higher. Something worse than just a planet and definitely more chaotic.”

“You did a good job fooling me?” Caspar asked as he stepped toward Manfred who paid him no mind as he stared out at the Land of Souls.

***

He could see a goat-headed man slowly descending toward them. It was apparent that he could harm anyone he chose, but he couldn’t be harmed himself. He was the only one who could see the creature. He glanced at the chalky faces of the people within diner alongside him. He didn’t know what to do.

The creature appeared and his hand hovered above the corporate man. The same process started to happen. Sparkles burst into the air as the man’s legs started to

shake and he fell down. His face grew pale. The sheriff knelt beside him and tried to wake him.

"How'd you do it?" the sheriff asked.

"Idiot, I didn't. I am tied here, defenseless and unable to lift a finger, but I know who did it. Get me out of here and I'll help you or at least try to."

The sheriff looked uncertain. He realized that he didn't have a choice. Tension arose as he stood above Caspar and unlocked his handcuffs. Caspar massaged his wrist where a perfect red circle had formed. He saw the goat-headed man coming toward him.

"Everyone, back to the kitchen!" he cried. "Run fast!"

***

"You do know, Manfred, that one day I will burn and skin you alive." Caspar said calmly, looking straight into his eyes.

"Nah," Manfred laughed. "You can't. You'll never be able to because you are weak hearted and are dependent on those around you. You've fallen in love and are in league with these so called heroes."

Manfred walked toward the glass door. "Your love is your weakness, Caspar, and you have let it overpower you."

"Sometimes, love becomes your strength," Caspar replied with certainty. Manfred stopped within his tracks and turned to face Caspar who was still

leaning against the railing and wasn't paying attention to him. "Aw, poor lad, love makes wise men fall into the pits of foolishness. When will you learn that this is no fairy tale, Caspar? When will you learn?"

“The day you will realize that fairy tales do exist,” Caspar murmured as he turned about to face him. “But the problem is with us. We just don’t want to admit it.”

“You are wrong. You are one of the heroes. Oh, you are such a hero, one who swindles and has adventures and falls in love. You are just one unlucky hero.”

***

One day, son, you are going to get a choice. A choice that will change the

world.

You just need to know that people will look up to you. These are people who are close to you, people who care for you.

At that time, you need to know that what you are doing is right. You need to know that what you will do will make everything better, once and for all.

You need to make that choice, whether it’s good or bad. You will be the one who will decide the fate of our own world.

***

“I am you, Manfred,” Caspar announced at last. “You are me and I am you. We are both alike. We are not brothers. We are not cousins. We aren’t even connected by blood. But you are me, because I made a mistake years ago. One I regret very much,” he sighed.

“It’s your entirely your fault, Caspar. Your friends are in danger because of you. Your parents died because of you. Your sister was killed because of you. Your Earth was going to be destroyed because of you. You made a mistake. Do you want to

you want to

know what mistake that is, Caspar? You brought me here into this world through a portal of your making. I was your mistake," Manfred replied with a smile.

***

Caspar could see the demon looking about in search of his prey. The kitchen was small, but it was able to hold everyone, none-the-less. He was caught in a struggle against an unknown entity, one only he could see. He didn't know what it was or why he was doing what he was doing. He just knew that he had to do something. He couldn't help but wonder as to why the creature hadn't killed him yet.

He took that as an advantage and toward the demon shouting, "Hey you! Come at me!"

Faces pressed against the kitchen door's window, their brows creased with confusion. They had no idea as to what Caspar was trying to do. There was no one there in front of him, yet he was yelling aloud.

The demon walked toward Caspar. Mid-way through its trajectory, it stopped, though. It was as if it couldn't go any further. It turned its head toward the kitchen and smiled.

***

"I was young. I didn't know what I was doing."

"Well, you ruined your life because of your innocence," Manfred responded. "You killed my parents, my sister, and my dog and left me in a cage from

where I couldn't escape. Yet escape, I did. I tried to kill you, but you stabbed me with

poison and I had to summon Death to live," Caspar admitted. "I do wonder sometimes, if you are my mirror reality. If you are chaos, that would make me order."

Manfred laughed heartily. "It's over, Caspar Socrates. It's over. You have lost again. I have won. This is how things were meant to be. This time, you can't do anything about it because you can't kill me."

Caspar stared at the fields in front of him, his shoulders shaking slightly as he began to laugh. Manfred stopped smiling and became a tad apprehensive. He glanced at him out of the corner of his and tried discern as what had gone wrong. What did he do? Why was Caspar laughing?

"What is it? Why are you doing this? I won! I won! Don't you understand? You lost!"

"The Achilles' heel, Manfred."

Manfred narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?" he sputtered. "You say we are same, that we're on the same side. But then, I know...I

realized what you meant. You have a knack of leaving clues for me to find. You were always successful because I was never able to understand your clues. Now I do. When you say we were the same, you meant you...literally. I have an Achilles' heel, so that means you do as well."

"What's my weak spot, then?" Manfred prodded, as his voice grew smaller. Caspar moved toward Manfred. He pointed at his head. "Here. Your brain.

That's your Achilles' heel," he proclaimed. "You are vulnerable because you are unable to admit that you have lost. You always thought you could win, that you were so intelligent and cunning so as to pass any challenge presented to you. In your mind, you would always win. You become vulnerable when you know you have lost, when you know you can't win."

“Nah, nah. You are an ordinary hero, Caspar.” There was no a hint of smile upon Manfred’s face as he looked deep into Caspar’s smoky eyes. “You are a hero. You have always been one.”

“People tend to believe in heroes, but they forget one thing. Heroes don’t exist, Manfred.” He smiled widely. “Heroes don’t exist. Only fools full of courage do.”

***

One day, you need to set things aside and know what’s important, son. One day, you are going to decide whether to give yourself up for the people you love or to live a selfish regrettable life.

Son, you must understand one thing. No one is a hero, but our belief makes one. Everyone has a villain inside of themselves, one who comes out, eventually.

You just need to know that you don’t live so long. That one day, you realize you are turning into someone you once dreaded the most.

***

The demon headed toward the kitchen. Caspar grabbed a fork off of the counter and tried to attack him. Somehow, he passed through the entity as if it were nothing more than an apparition. He dove again, but was unsuccessful. Whenever he tried anything, the goat-headed man somehow disappeared and then reappeared.

The beautiful twisted horns glistened and the long, curving jaw was clenched tightly. Small teeth shown as the demon smiled, its sunken eyes full of mirth. The

Baphotem wanted something more than just random killings. Of that, he was sure. Somehow, he knew that Baphotem was just a dream.

He watched the demon progress toward the kitchen door, opening its door. He brought his hand forward and started sucking the essence out of the people crowded within the room. Anger filled him. Not because they were dying, but rather of the fact that he couldn't do anything to save them. He felt helpless. In a matter of seconds, everyone in the diner would die, leaving him alone in the end.

***

Manfred walked to the railing, thinking about what he wanted to say next. Caspar had left him speechless.

"Admit it, you lost. I found your weakness. The one you've kept hidden from everyone," Caspar said.

"You are right, Caspar. You are right. You found my weakness. You found the way to kill me. That doesn't mean you will be able to stop me, though. That doesn't mean I will stop doing what I am doing now." Manfred smiled once more. "I will not stop and I will carve the living hell out of the universe."

Caspar shook his head. "No. No!"

"You are just ordinary, Caspar, because you are a hero. Heroes will never be able to defeat me. They'll never be able to fight me. Only the bad guys can, because to break a rock, you need a rock. Therefore, no hero can defeat me."

The decision will be to choose. Which one are you? The one who ends everything, or the one who protects everything?

“If I leave you now, you would create chaos again. I can’t be the one who ends everything. I have to be the one who protects everything,” Caspar stated firmly.

Anger spread across Manfred’s face. “Only bad guys, Caspar. Remember? Only bad guys!”

“Then you must know one thing, Manfred.” Caspar moved closer to him, leaving just a tiny space between them. “You must know one thing and remember it well.” He smiled broadly. “I am no hero!” With that, Caspar pushed Manfred off of the railing.

The entire group hurried through the glass door as they tried to catch a glimpse of what was going on. Manfred had gotten a hold of Caspar’s satchel. Caspar smiled and winked as they fell off of the balcony.

Ivy gasped. Balthazar’s mouth dropped opened in surprise. They were the first ones to see what had happened. They reached the railing and looked down. No one was there. No one tumbled through the air. It was as if Manfred and Caspar had disappeared. As if they’d gone through an unexpected portal and vanished from the face of Earth.

They were gone. Forever.

***

Caspar marched toward the goat-headed man, but before he could do anything, the creature began to yell. Yet it didn’t make a sound. A flash of light burst from his chest and blinded everyone, leaving them surprised. He tucked his head against the curve of his arm to shield himself from the light by his arm and fell back on to the floor.

The light diminished. As he opened his eyes, he found the demon had vanished. No one was there. Not even a hint of an apparition. He pulled himself to his feet and rushed into the kitchen to find that everyone was safe and sound.

The family hugged each other close in hopes of reassuring themselves that they were fine. The corporate man stared down at his suit and started dancing on the spot. The chef and the sheriff embraced each other, crying at the same time. The pregnant woman's hands curled around her belly to make sure that the baby was doing fine.

"We saw light. A big light. Is it over? Is everything ok? Is everyone safe?" Caspar smiled. His once hard face grew soft, second by second. "Yes, we are

safe. We are safe. It is over now."

***

It had been two days.

There was not a hint of Caspar Socrates anywhere. He was lost. Death had confirmed that he hadn't reaped Caspar and Manfred's souls. That meant they weren't dead. Yet where were they?

Everything had changed. Ivy had no idea what to do. She was living in the House of David with the rest of the group, but had lost interest in her surroundings completely. When the time of burial for the martyred Nephilims came, Vivian was also buried. She had died from a severe head injury. Her death caused Siphon's heart to hurt incessantly.

Cassius had approached her before the burial. "Caspar hasn't returned, but to respect his role in the war, we need to give him a burial. A human one."

Ivy glanced at him with red puffy red eyes. For awhile, she remained silent, until she found it within herself to speak up. “How can you have a burial of a person who hasn’t died? That’s not just,” she said, her voice a tad harsh.

“I know, but we have to perform last rites anyway. We have to pay respect to him somehow.”

Ivy nodded, although something held her back. She didn’t want things to end, not like this. She wanted to be on Caspar’s side. To hug him right now. Despite his cruel nature and the stupid arrogant tone he always used, he’d come to mean something to her.

The burial took place. Vivian received a Nephilim burial. Capernaum was given one, as well. Balthazar had flown away, refusing to look back. He refused to let go of his emotions and release his pain. Harvard had attended the burial with Siphon and Hope standing beside him. The coffins were pushed to the water until they sunk down into the deep.

Ivy made her over to Siphon and hugged him to her, even though she hadn’t had a good companionship with him. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Siphon nodded and gave her a sad smile.

No one knew what she was feeling. The two boys whom she’d loved had been buried. Ryun and Caspar. She knew she was unlucky in love, destined not to have a relationship with anyone. She never did find out whether he liked her or not. She understood that he was now gone and that all her questions about him were left unanswered. She was unable to let him go.

Siphon went away and Harvard went back to where he belonged. The burial was over for everyone. The Nephilims didn’t come to the human burial, but they paid their respects, none-the-less. Ivy and Lazarus were the only ones in attendance. It was

autumn and a cool slight breeze across the plane. Beneath a willow tree sat a tombstone. The name, CASPAR SOCRATES, was etched across the stone.

Lazarus, standing tall beside Ivy, presented her with a bouquet of flowers. She took it and carefully settled it upon the grave. She knelt before it, slowly brushing her palms across its surface.

“Master Socrates fancied you, Ms. Demetrius,” Lazarus said. “He always did. He told me so. He cared for you a lot. He tried to be heartless, but he wasn’t. He always cared for those he came across.

“He was a good man. A very good man, better than his own father. I promised to take care of him, but now I see I was unsuccessful in doing so. I regret that, but I know I served him well.

“I don’t know what the cause of his disappearance is and I don’t mean to ask because I want to keep it that way. I want to keep it a secret.” He watched as her tears, streamed down her cheeks. “I will be waiting in the car, Ms. Demetrius. Whenever you are ready, we shall go.”

Ivy nodded. He made his way to the BMW. Ivy stared down at the grave. It looked so lifeless, so empty, and so silent. She knew the coffin was filled with mud, sand, and few things that once belonged to Caspar. The whistling leaves rustled above her as several clouds moved in.

“I want you to know that...um...I miss you. I miss you a lot. Uh . . .” Her throat seized as she tried to fight back tears. “I will miss you a lot. I know you sacrificed yourself for all of us, to remove chaos from this world, to remove all of our miseries. You always used to say that you never found true happiness in this world and that you wouldn’t be happy doing small things. You were wrong. You were happy. You just didn’t show it.

“I knew it because I could see right through you. I thought that you were barely human, at first, and that you didn’t have emotions, but . . .”

She squeezed her eyes closed as she tried to hold back more of her tears. “But I think you were the most emotional person I ever met. Your miracles made a difference and you had this absurd stupidity that I found to be so cute. Um...Uh...and I just want to say that...please, come back. P – Please, come back Caspar! No matter what you do, just come back! I love you and I miss you.”

She ran to the car, unable to wipe away her tears. She sat in her seat, her shoulders shaking as she cried.

Lazarus sat in the driver’s seat, waiting. “Is there a place in mind you want to go to, Ms. Demetrius?”

She nodded. “I know exactly where to go, Lazarus.”

***

Siphon waited at the door. He knew it was the end. Everything he loved was now destroyed. The door opened. Within it, stood a man with eyes as cold as marble.

“Siphon, your presence is expected,” he said. “Yes, Zephyr.”

He strode inside. It looked like a normal house and there was nothing spectacular about it. Warmth permeated throughout the entire alcove. He made his way toward a bedroom. Zephyr held the door open and he walked inside to find an old man that looked as ancient as time.

His face was full of wrinkles and lines. He was drinking soup, holding a spoon within his trembling hands. A long white beard covered his entire face and thick bushy brows hid his blue eyes.

"Siphon, please, sit down."

Zephyr brought forth a small four-legged stool that sat close to the bed. Siphon made his way over to it and sat down. He stared at the meek, old man, surprised that his voice was so commanding.

"I am ready for my punishment," Siphon breathed with disgust. "I have lost everything. I am ready to face any pain you have thought up for me because I have nothing to lose now."

"Punishment, my lad?" the old man's voice was cheerful. "Why would I punish the one who saved Father's Creation?" He smiled. He set the soup aside and placed his hand upon his head. "Siphon, I made a mistake long ago. A mistake named Capernaum. I tortured and threw him down and he became a demon. I now regret it. Capernaum was my brother. He remained my brother until his death. He helped us, without letting anyone know. That's what loyalty is. I don't want to commit another mistake."

"So you mean...?"

The old man smiled. "You shall go back to Heaven and train as an Archangel. From now on, you will be my left hand."

"B – But...Vivian . . ."

The old man's smile faded. "I apologize that I can't do more about her. We have lost a prophet, but to you...You have lost your life and I am sorry for that."

Siphon ran an unsteady hand through his hair and cried.

“You can’t blame the past, Siphon. You have to make your future. Think about future,” the old man said with a wrinkled smile. “I hope you will forget it.”

How can I forget it?

“Thank you. Thank you, Archangel Michael for giving me another chance.”

***

Hope thought about the fact that she could have died. She’d never imagined going through what she had the last few days, but she was happy that everything was over. She had given the ring to Death, so he could keep it somewhere secure.

After that, everything became normal. She didn’t hear voices and she knew would no see anyone. She was happy about that. Everything was over. Her father now looked cheerful and had gotten a job as a salesman. She had made friends and had restarted school and started getting straight A’s. She had got her life back again.

It was perhaps a Thursday, when she was coming back from school and talking to her friends along the way, when she caught sight of a nearby the church. She never went to church, as she had no belief in God, but for some inexplicable reason, she couldn’t take her eyes off of the building. Her friends had gone ahead and had failed to realize that she wasn’t with them. They made their way back to her to find that she stood rooted in place, staring at the church.

“What’s wrong, Hope?” a girl with curly hair asked. “Is there something wrong?”

“No. Uh...You guys go on ahead. I’ll catch up.”

She didn’t hear her friend’s disapproval as she ran inside the church with her bag dangling on her hip. She saw a row of seats and a furnished interior. A priest sat in one of the rows reading passages from a big, brown book.

She sat next to him and said, “Hello. Um . . .” She felt a tad awkward. “What is it, child?” he prodded

“I need to talk to you.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled softly as he smiled. “Well, how about you tell me about what’s wrong?”

Hope relaxed and returned the smile.

***

Death was standing in front of a boy who looked so small and had no idea as to what was going on. He carried a long, sharp staff within his hands.

He stared down at the boy and said, “You will be my executioner. A fixer, if you will.”

He then launched into a lengthy explanation as to what it meant to be a fixer. He told him as to why he had been chosen to be a fixer and what purpose he would serve.

“It’s a tough job.” “Are you a tough kid?”

“Yes,” the boy said confidently, yet his voice was uncertain about the answer. “Then you will be able to do it.”

He hesitated, at first, but then finally asked, “Am I your first executioner? I mean, am I the only you choose or was there someone else before me?”

Death was trying to be formal with the boy, because in a first meeting, he never tried to crack jokes or laugh. He gave the boy a small, sweet smile. “There was one. He was someone I will always remember, kid. He was the best. Without him, this world would not have been the same.”

“What was his name?” the boy asked with excitement. “Caspar Socrates.”

“Where is he now?”

Death’s smiled broadened. “He has gone on a vacation. A long, satisfying vacation.”

***

Several years later . . .

Ivy was tired. It was a long day, filled with tiresome details. She took a deep breath and kept all of her medical books in her bag and fastened it tight. For several years now, she’d been living in Socrates manor. Though, she had recently bought an apartment in London where she was studying, where she would be able to shine and rise. Her head swung up when someone called her name.

“Ivy!”

She turned around. Her eyes opened wide. Although quite a bit of time had passed, she remembered the boyish face, the long spiky hair, the kohl around the eyes, the bare chest with full of tattoos, and the long overcoat that changed its colors vigorously from ash to green and then to black.

“Death!” she murmured, confused. She didn’t want to think about her past, but there was nothing she could do about that. The past had come to her. “What are you doing here?”

“I had made a promise to Caspar before he went to war. He said that when you went to medical college or achieved something in your life that you desired, on that day, I was to give this to you.” From within the folds of his coat, he produced a letter and handed it to her. “I am just completing my duty. It was his last request and my utmost duty to fulfill.”

Ivy took the letter with shaking hands and carefully brushed her fingers across the envelope. A roaring burned within the fireplace, warming her and the entire room. She didn’t know what to do. She wanted to open it, thinking that perhaps this last letter of his would answer every question she had.

She stopped herself from doing so and looked up. “How is everyone? Do you know?” she asked.

“Balthazar made his family proud. His father had tears in his eyes when he hugged him tight and welcomed him home.” He chuckled. “Harvard is now the leader of the pack. Siphon has become an archangel and works for Michael and the best thing is, Capernaum’s statue is made in Heaven and the words, ‘The Loyal Servant,’ are written upon it. As for Raphael, he is...well, let’s say like every other rogue angel, he had disappeared.”

“That’s actually really good.” She beamed. It was the first hearty smile she had given in months. “It’s great.”

“I never told anyone, but the cane which Caspar used was my seal.” “But I thought you gifted him . . .”

“I gifted him my seal. It was safe and it was in the right hands. Now he has taken it with him wherever he is right now. When he was poisoned, he thought he was going to die. At the time, he didn’t even know he had an Achilles’ heel so he thought he would die.” Death was speaking to himself now rather than to Ivy. “I didn’t bring him a cure. It just took him some time to cure himself.”

The thought about Caspar being alive, but lost, was something she didn’t want to hear. Her ears started to hurt. She looked down at the letter so she wouldn’t have to face Death.

“Are you going to open that?”

Ivy kept looking at the envelope. The letter...she was sure that it unlocked everything about Caspar, of what he was trying to hide from everyone for so long. It might explain why he was like the way he’d been and how he and Manfred knew each other, what was his history. Perhaps it spoke of how he got his Achilles’ heel and how did he end up like this. The letter held answer to each one of her questions, to everything she was looking for.

She approached the fireplace and dropped the letter into the flames. She saw it burn, slowly, as the flames engulfed the paper and turned it to ash. Instead of seeing a piece of paper burning, she saw something else. She saw that the answers to her questions were now left behind. She knew, as one flame caught another, she would never get the answers she sought. Yet, somehow, she didn’t want to know. Perhaps it was her choice. Perhaps it was what she wanted now.

“Why did you do it?” Death asked.

“Sometimes, it is better to live a life with a lie, than to know the truth,” she replied, tears shining within her eyes.

EPILOGUE

It had been days.

After the day she had met Death and had burned the letter, Ivy was feeling that she had a new life. The past was past. She was now looking at the present and the future. The snowy afternoon was a chilly experience for her. She wasn't really acclimatized to such weather.

Walking along and stamping her warm leather boots, she made her way to the university with a bag slung across her shoulders. The gates were big and security guards with furry jackets were standing nearby, blowing the warm air of their breaths against their naked hands.

She stopped within her tracks as she drew closer to the gates. She frowned and turned around as a familiar smell of someone she knew, a scent from the distant past, assailed her senses. She looked around, trying to detect the person's presence, when she caught sight of a bench hidden in the shadows of several trees nearby. Someone sat there, waiting. Her eyes widened as she saw the cane.

"Miss, are you coming?" the guard asked with irritation. "Wait!" she breathed.

She dropped her bag and ran toward the bench. It couldn't be. It couldn't be!

He's back!

Her chest burned as she breathed in the icy air as she ran, yet she didn't care. She just wanted to see, to know if he was back. Was he sitting there watching her? As she drew closer, she saw that the shadows were not able to cover the bench. There was no one was sitting on it.

Ivy rubbed her forehead. Damn! With a sigh of angst, she turned about when something caught her eye. She found something familiar, something she remembered from her past. A small, red rectangular diary sat upon the bench. Caspar's diary. She knelt within the snow and with trembling hands, she reached for the diary. It was empty. She flipped through its pages and only saw a blank page.

I never knew you wrote diaries, hotshot.

She remembered that she'd said that to Caspar before they were going out to find Solomon's descendant.

I always wanted one of those. I always wanted to write my feelings down on a piece of paper. I wish I had one like yours.

Her heart started pounding. She had requested...no...she had generally told him that she wanted one of these. He had bought one for her.

But how did it end up here?

It was a startling thought that she tried to leave behind, but all it came back to one conclusion. The one thought she was having difficulty in trying to accept. A diary sat on the bench, the very one she'd wanted before, could only mean one thing.

He was back!

About The Author

Kevin Solomon Missal is a sixteen-year-old boy studying at the Faith Academy in New Delhi. At the age of fourteen, he wrote his debut novel, Damien Black: the Battle of Lost Ages. He enjoys the following hobbies such as reading, books, and writing.

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